'ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
FIRST APRIL NUMBER

FEATURING
THE THIN LINE
by Kenneth L. Sinclair

BEGINNING
RED SUNDOWN
a new serial
by Ray Gaulden

World Wide Services

"OWN a Business" Coupon

DURACLEAN CO., 5-694A Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Ill., U.S.A.

Without obligation to me, send booklet and letter giving full details. Tell me how I may OWN a growing business of my own built upon satisfied customers.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

Start Now . . . while employed

Are You The Man?

If you have longed for the prestige and financial independence of YOUR OWN business, you can now realize this desire . . . if you can qualify for a Duraclean dealership. We are now enlarging this 25-year-old chain of independently-owned service dealerships which has rapidly grown to a world-wide service.

You must however be reliable, honest, diligent, and able to make a small investment in a business of your own . . . a profession for which we will personally and quickly train you. If needed, we will help finance you.

We want to assure your success. A Duraclean dealer will train and assist you. He'll reveal his successful plan of building customers. He will **work with you.** This business is **easy to learn** . . . quickly established.

This is a sound, lifetime business that grows from REPEAT ORDERS and customer RECOMMENDATIONS. Alert dealers can gross an hourly profit of $5.00 on own service plus $3.00 on EACH service man at National Price Guide charges. Mail coupon **today** for full details.

You are Trained in a New Profession . . . to Revive, Clean, Protect Home Furnishings

You have the opportunity to steadily increase the income for your family month after month and year after year without waiting for a raise. Duraclean dealers enjoy unusual profit on both materials and labor . . . after paying servicemen or salesmen. Service is rendered IN the home . . . some have shops or offices . . . others operate from their home with no overhead expense. No experience is needed. We show you 27 ways to bring customers to you.

Our **MUTUAL COOPERATION** program gives you many unique and continuous advantages: **National Advertising** in Life, McCalls, House & Garden, MacLean's (Canada) and a dozen others. **Copyright** and **trademark** protection. **Certificate** approves equipment and materials. **Products Insurance. Six-year Warranty. Pocket Demonstrators. Sales Book. Advertising Folders & Cards. Tested Ads, Ad Cuts & Mats. Store Display Cards. Radio & TV Musical Commercials.** Home Show **Booth Display. Publicity Program** gets Free Local newspaper stories. **Prizes. Laboratory** research and development. **Duragram** bulletins. **Resale Service. Annual Conventions.** Behind all this is a headquarters interested in YOUR personal success.

Almost every building houses a customer needing one or both services. Furniture stores, department stores, interior decorators, upholsterers and carpet stores, develop Duracleaning and Duraproofing jobs from their customers. Auto dealers take orders and have used cars Duracleaned. You have a high hourly income from the day you start . . . even while still employed.

What Dealers Say

Fuller Munroe: "I give full time to estimating and supervising. We average $9 hourly income per service man but one man today produced $118.00."

T. Komari (Japan): "Have 1,000,000 yen contract Duracleaning for U.S. Army."

W. Lookiebill: "We've had 20 years of pleasant dealings. I'm 65 but am setting my sights for 20 more years."

P. Freidinger: "Had a big moth-proof business last year; one job was $322.25."

R. Kimbrough: "Finished First White House of Confederacy and am so Duraclean the Governor's Mansion."

H. Satterfield: "Duracleaned chair for largest department store and got order for 60 to 75 chairs, couches and davenports."

E. Schenk: "The customers I had on **House and Garden** ads were very pleased. Their furnishings came out beautiful."

A. Ullman: "It is very encouraging that every demonstration has been a sale."

L. Johnson: "Each customer leads to 3 or 4 more. One job two of us cleaned $125 worth in 5 hours."

More quotations in our literature.

Duraclean Revolutionizes Old Methods

Duraclean's growth to a world-wide service resulted from **customer convenience** plus its **many superiorities** over ordinary cleaning. Housewives, clubs, hotels, offices and institutions deeply appreciate not having furnishngs out of use for days and weeks.

They are thrilled to see their upholstery and floor coverings cleaned and revived with a **new consideration for its life and beauty.** Duraclean doesn't merely clean . . . it restores natural lubrication to wool and other fibers. Colors revive. The re-enlivened rug and carpet pile unmats and rises.

Aerated foam created by the electric Foamovator (right) banishes dirt, grease and many unsightly spots . . . **without scrubbing.** Customers tell friends how Duraclean has eliminated customary soaking, shrinking and breaking of fibers from scrubbing . . . how the mild quick action foam, lightly applied, provides safety from color runs and roughened fabric they have previously experienced . . . how fabrics look fresher, brighter, cleaner . . . how convnient it is not to have furnishings gone.

They appreciate the courteous, personalized service of Duraclean craftsmen. Such service is NEWS . . . it spreads to friends and neighbors. Customers become your best salesmen.

The companion Duraproof service not only kills moths and carpet beetles . . . it is WARRANTED to make fabric repellent to both. Damage to household goods and wearing apparel is greater from moths than fire. This modern treatment (illustrated above) PROTECTS rugs, carpets, upholstery, furs, clothing, blankets, piano-felts, auto-interiors, etc.

EASY TERMS: A modest payment establishes your business . . . pay balance from sales. We furnish everything from electric machines to introduction slips including **enough materials to return TOTAL investment.**

FREE Booklet . . . Send for it NOW

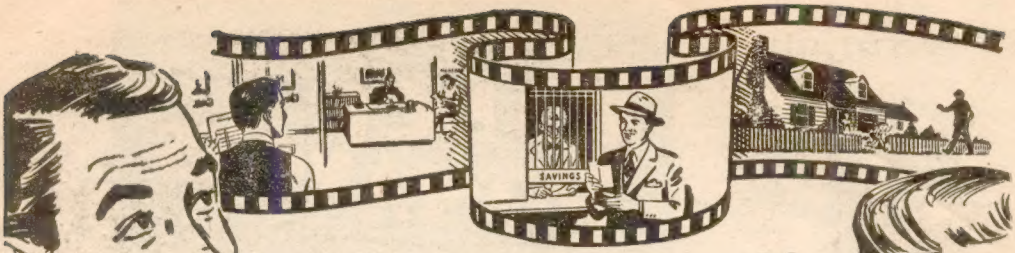
Our first letter and illustrated booklet will explain everything . . . modern services, waiting market, how business grows, your large profit and PROTECTED territory. You can have your business operating in a very few days. **Mail above coupon today while you can still get a dealership in YOUR location.**

FREE Booklet tells how!

Mail Coupon TODAY

DURACLEAN CO., 5-694A Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

A Duraclean dealer will **work with you** in your town.



Picture yourself going places

You've done it often. Call it day-dreaming if you like, but you've seen yourself in a bigger job — giving orders and making decisions — driving off in a smart new car — buying your family a fine home.

There's nothing wrong with dreams. But how about making them come true? *You can do it*, if you're willing to try!

Look around you. The men who are going places are the *trained* men. They've learned special skills that bring them better jobs and higher pay. It's the men *without* training whose dreams never come true.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and wish? If you really *want to succeed*, you can get the training you need by studying at home in your spare time. International Correspondence Schools offer you a course in just about any field you choose, giving you the practical plus the bedrock facts and theory. No skimming or skimping! And you'll be earning while you learn. Students report better jobs and more pay within a few months.

Look over the list of subjects in the coupon below. Pick out the one that interests you most — the one that holds the greatest future for you. Then mark the coupon, and mail it today. *Find out* what I. C. S. can do for you. It costs only a stamp or postcard, but it's the first step if you want to go places!

SMARTEST THING HE EVER DID

"I noticed that the trained men held the better jobs. That's when I decided to take an I. C. S. course. Enrolling with I. C. S. was one of the smartest things I ever did. The position as Plant Engineer I hold today is largely due to the 'know-how' derived from my I. C. S. texts. I. C. S. can help any man who will study."

L. P. S., Elkhart, Ind.

FREE BOOKS

1. **36-page, pocket-size guide to advancement "How to Succeed."**
2. **Big catalog on career that interests you.**
3. **Free sample lesson.**

For Real Job Security — Get an I. C. S. Diploma! . . Easy Pay Plan . . I. C. S., Scranton 9, Penna.

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ICS

BOX 54276B, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

(Partial list of 277 courses)

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the opportunity booklet about the field BEFORE which I have marked X (plus sample lesson):

ARCHITECTURE and BUILDING CONSTRUCTION
- ☐ Air Conditioning—Refrig.
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Interior
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Building Maintenance
- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Estimating
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Painting Contractor
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Reading Arch. Blueprints

ART
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Sketching and Painting

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding
- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto-Engine Tune Up
- ☐ Automobile Mechanic

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Public Accounting
- ☐ Creative Salesmanship
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Letter-writing Improvement
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Professional Secretary
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Stenographic-Secretarial
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
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- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chem. Lab. Technician
- ☐ General Chemistry
- ☐ Natural Gas Prod. & Trans.
- ☐ Petroleum Engineering
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

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- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Struct. Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

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- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Mapping
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- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
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RADIO, TELEVISION
- ☐ Industrial Electronics
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- ☐ Television Technician

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- ☐ Combustion Engineering
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- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

TEXTILE
- ☐ Carding and Spinning
- ☐ Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Loom Fixi'g ☐ Textile Des'ing
- ☐ Textile Eng'r'g ☐ Throwing
- ☐ Warping and Weaving

MISCELLANEOUS
- ☐ Domestic Refrigeration
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Ocean Navigation
- ☐ Professional Engineering
- ☐ Short Story Writing
- ☐ Telephony

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

Occupation_____

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools, Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada. . . . Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces.

31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST
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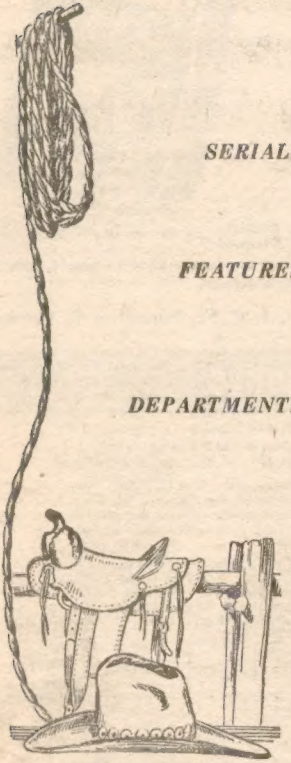
CONTENTS

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

NOVEL	THE THIN LINE	Kenneth L. Sinclair	14
SHORT STORIES	FLIGHT TO DAWSON	Ben Frank	46
	BLOOD BREAM	Herbert D. Kastle	75
	REPUTATION	J. L. Bouma	85
	PAWNEE COUNTRY	Adam Chase	93
SERIALS	RED SUNDOWN, Part One	Ray Gaulden	58
	BULLET RANGE, Conclusion	Dan Riordan	102
FEATURES	ARID-ZONA, Verse	Limerick Luke	51
	WINTER OF HELL, a True Story	Will Watson	55
DEPARTMENTS	OUR AIR MAIL	Our Readers	6
	TRAIL DUST		9
	RANCH FLICKER TALK Many Rivers to Cross Robert Ryan	Robert Cummings	10 12
	KNOW YOUR WEST, a Quiz	Rattlesnake Robert	74
	THE WESTERNERS' CROSS-WORD PUZZLE		92
	OUT OF THE CHUTES	The Editors	101
	WHOM SHALL I MARRY?	Professor Marcus Mari	114



HELEN TONO
Editor

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You Practice SERVICING with Kits I Send You

Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I send to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. With my Servicing Course you build the modern Radio shown at left. You build a Multitester and use it to help make $10, $15 a week fixing sets in spare time while training. All equipment is yours to keep. Coupon below will bring book of important facts. It shows other equipment you build.

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As part of my Communications Course I send you parts to build low-power Broadcasting Transmitter at left. Use it to get practical experience. You put this station "on the air" . . . perform procedures demanded of broadcasting station operators. An FCC Commercial Operator's License can be your ticket to a bright future. My Communications Course trains you to get your license. Mail coupon. Book shows other equipment you build for practical experience.

I Will Train You at Home in Spare Time to be a RADIO-TELEVISION Technician

TELEVISION

Making Jobs, Prosperity

25 million homes have Television sets now. Thousands more sold every week. Trained men needed to make, install, service TV sets. About 200 television stations on the air. Hundreds more being built. Good job opportunities here for qualified technicians, operators, etc.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Our 40th Year

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay, Success

Training PLUS opportunity is the PERFECT COMBINATION for job security, advancement. When times are good, the trained man makes the BETTER PAY, gets PROMOTED. When jobs are scarce, the trained man enjoys GREATER SECURITY. NRI training can help assure you and your family more of the better things of life. Radio is bigger than ever with over 3,000 broadcasting stations and more than 115 MILLION sets in use, and Television is moving ahead fast.

N.R.I. Training Leads to Good Jobs Like These

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"I have progressed very rapidly. My present position is Studio Supervisor with KEDD Television, Wichita."—Elmer Frewaldt, 3026 Stadium, Wichita, Kans.

"Fix sets part time in my shop. Made about $500 first three months of the year. Could have more but this is about all I can handle."—Frank Borer, Lorain, Ohio.

"I've come a long way in Radio and Television since graduating. Have my own business on Main Street."—Joe Travers, Asbury Park, New Jersey.

"I didn't know a thing about Radio. Now have a good job as Studio Engineer at KMMJ."—Bill Delzell, Central City, Nebraska.

BROADCASTING: Chief Technician, Chief Operator, Power Monitor, Recording Operator, Remote Control Operator. SERVICING: Home and Auto Radios, Television Receivers, FM Radios, P. A. Systems. IN RADIO PLANTS: Design Assistant, Technician, Tester, Serviceman, Service Manager. SHIP AND HARBOR RADIO: Chief Operator, Radio-Telephone Operator. GOVERNMENT RADIO: Operator in Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Forestry Service Dispatcher, Airways Radio Operator. AVIATION RADIO: Transmitter Technician, Receiver Technician, Airport Transmitter Operator. TELEVISION: Pick-up Operator, Television Technician, Remote Control Operator.

Start Soon to Make $10. $15 a Week Extra Fixing Sets

My training is practical, complete; is backed by 40 years of success training men at home. My well-illustrated lessons give you basic principles you need and my skillfully developed kits of parts "bring to life" things you learn from the lessons. I start sending you special booklets that show you how to fix sets the day you enroll. Multitester you build with my parts helps you discover and correct set troubles, helps you make money fixing neighbors' sets in spare time while training. Many make $10, $15 a week extra this way.

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Act now to get more of the good things of life. I send actual lesson to prove NRI home training is practical, thorough. My 64-page book "How to be a Success in Radio-Television" shows what my graduates are doing and earning. It gives important facts about your opportunities in Radio-Television. Take NRI training for as little as $5 a month. Many graduates make more than the total cost of my training in two weeks. Mail coupon now to: J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5DQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 40th year.

AVAILABLE to all qualified VETERANS UNDER G.I. BILLS

The ABC's of SERVICING

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5DQ
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE.
(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name ..... Age .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone .... State .....

VETS write in date of discharge .....

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

Mail Today—Tested Way to Better Pay

Doesn't Get Mail

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl and would love to get some letters; I don't receive mail very often. I have blue eyes and reddish hair, am 5' tall, weigh 91 lbs., and am 15 years old. I like hillbilly music, dancing, and horseback riding. I'd love to hear from boys and girls 12 to 19 years old, from all over the world. So fill up my mail box, pen pals.

ROSETTA CHOATE

Star Route
Elkton, Kentucky

Stamp Collector

Dear Editor:

I hope there will be room in your column for my letter. I'm 13 years old, 5' 4", have blonde hair and blue eyes, and am in the 8th grade. I like all sports, but baseball is my favorite. I collect stamps, movie stars' pictures, and rocks. I promise to answer all the letters I receive, and will exchange snapshots.

LOUISE HAUGEN

441-15th Avenue
Longview, Washington

Irish

Dear Editor:

I've been a steady reader of RANCH ROMANCES for some time, and have tried writing before, but with no luck. Here's hoping this time. I'm an Irish redhead, 16 years old, with blue eyes, and I'm 5' 8½" tall. My favorite pastimes are horseback riding and letter writing. I would like to hear from anyone 16 years old and up, and will answer all letters. So come on, guys and gals, brighten up my mail call.

DAWN JAMES

Box 794
Florence, Ariz.

Music Lover

Dear Editor:

I would very much like to correspond with girls and fellows of all ages. I'm 28, am 5' 11½" tall, weight 155 lbs., have brown hair and eyes. I love to write, read, swim, ride horses, and all music appeals to me. Let me hear from you, guys and gals.

DICK PRESTON

P.O. Box 125
Niles, Ohio

On the Shy Side

Dear Editor:

Can a lonesome widow invade your pen pal column? I'm 59 years old, am 5' 3" tall, weigh 110 lbs. I'm a little on the shy side, but like a good time. I don't get much mail, so here's hoping all you wonderful people will overload my mail box.

MRS. SARAH McDONALD

c/o J. W. Bollinger
R. R. 6
Ottumwa Iowa

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Sweet Sixteen

Dear Editor:

How about putting my letter on the air mail page so I may get some pen pals? I'm 16 years old, have blonde hair and brown eyes, and am 5' 2" tall. I like all sports and all types of music. My hobbies are square dancing and writing letters. I'd like to hear from girls and boys from 16-21 in the U.S.A. and any other country. I'll be waiting for your letters.

GLENDA HARELSON

Woodleaf, Star Route 3147
Oroville, Calif.

From Down Under

Dear Editor:

This is a plea from three Australian soldiers in Korea. We're mighty lonely up here, and would like to receive letters from America. Bill is 5' 11", fair hair, brown eyes, weighing 180 lbs. Bruce is 5' 10", brown hair, brown eyes, weighing 176 lbs. David is 5' 5", blonde hair, green eyes, weighing 128 lbs. So come on, all you American girls, drop us a line. All letters will be answered, and photographs sent with each.

6/878 PVT. THORNE, B. R.
5/2505 PVT. DENNIS, B.
4/1532 PVT. GOLDSWORTHY, D.

H.Q. COY.
1st Btn. Royal Aust. Regiment
1 Com. Div., B.A.P.O. 3, Korea

First Try

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into Our Air Mail, and I would be very grateful if you would print my letter. I'd like to write to people everywhere. I am 12 years, 5' 3½" tall, and I weigh 110 lbs. I have brown hair and blue-green eyes. Will answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

MARY BRANNON

Frenchton
West Virginia

"WELCOME BACK,

Screenland

and Silver Screen

It's good to know that those two sparkling movie magazines, SCREENLAND and SILVER SCREEN, are returning to the newsstands. They're among my favorites and it will be a pleasure to read them again. Welcome!"

—Marilyn Monroe, star of 20th Century Fox production, "Seven Year Itch"

Marilyn Monroe's enthusiasm represents the way Hollywood's great stars have welcomed SCREENLAND Magazine back. You'll find the exciting current issue of SCREENLAND Magazine on all newsstands now. SILVER SCREEN will be there soon too. You won't want to miss either.

Sincerely,

Editor
SCREENLAND and SILVER SCREEN

DON'T LET THIS SPECIAL OFFER GET AWAY!

By accepting this special introductory deal, you save a big $1.01 on single-copy costs – assure uninterrupted delivery of RANCH ROMANCES right to your home!

Here's what you get for little more than a penny a day if you act *now:*

- *over 1700 pages of western-style love and action*
- *more than 100 new novels, novelettes and short stories*
- *almost 25 stranger-than-fiction true tales of the Old West*
- *plus a regular Western movie feature by Robert Cummings . . . personal correspondence column . . . advice on love and marriage . . . cartoons . . . Western crosswords . . . and much, much more.*

32 weeks (16 issues) of RANCH ROMANCES only **$2.99**

Use this handy order form today to take advantage of the *greatest reading bargain in America!*

RANCH ROMANCES 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. RR-4-1

Yes, enter my RANCH ROMANCES subscription for the next 32 weeks (16 issues) at only $2.99 . . . a money-saving rate that brings me the equivalent of 4 issues as a gift. My $2.99 is enclosed.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

(Add 50¢ for Canadian postage; $1.00 for foreign)

TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

AFTER THE first rain of the season, San Francisco, Calif., officials discovered an unexpected feature in their lavish new $14,000,000 airport terminal. The roof leaks.

A TAXI DRIVER in Detroit, Mich., laughed when a passenger tried to hold him up with a gun. "That's just a toy," the driver said. The hold-up man agreed, pulled a knife, and got the driver's money.

TOO MUCH was more than enough for a Baton Rouge, La., man, when a prankster sent to his home: a lady seeking her lost dog, a hearse to pick up a body, and a septic tank repairman. He called the police, who arrived in time to meet the final visitor—a truck driver coming to pick up a dead horse.

A MINERAL WELLS, Tex., cow proved she was man's best friend by fighting off a deer which had attacked her owner.

THE ONE and only policeman in Montague, Calif., turned in his badge, annoyed because he was asked to take over the extra jobs of building inspector and city maintenance man, with no raise in pay.

MICE CAN'T drive, but one in Ellendale, N.D., caused a car to land in a ditch. The mouse, scampering across the dashboard, so unnerved the driver that he lost control of the car.

PRISONERS in the Golden, Colo., jail had plenty of clues to offer about the escape of five fellow inmates. The escapees had been making so much noise for the last couple of weeks, sawing through the bars, that other convicts hadn't even been able to sleep.

FORT WORTH, Tex., "rebels" were pleased but puzzled when a Texas flag blew South, while at the same time an American flag on the same pole was blowing North.

THERE'S BEEN progress even in the alibis being given for speeding these days, according to the records of the San Francisco, Calif., municipal court. Instead of "I didn't know I was driving so fast," the favorite current excuse of speeders is, "My psychiatrist says I can't help speeding."

DURING a bitterly cold spell in Glendive, Mont., an oil worker walked off the job, saying that he wanted to go home for his fur cap. His home is—in Texas.

IT WAS a rocky road to romance for a Palmyra, Mo., man who parked at the side of a road to propose to his girl. He got a ticket for improper parking, and his car was hit by a passing auto. But the girl said yes.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Many Rivers to Cross

A fur-trapping hero and a man-trapping heroine provide laughs along with the action in MGM's delightful new Western

IT ISN'T often we have a sure 'nough comedy to write about in these columns. Life in the Old West, as Hollywood sees it, was pretty grim and earnest.

The jokes are purely incidental to most Westerns, and the laughs—when there are any—are usually limited to one bewhiskered old geezer who provides relief from the excitement.

So it was fun seeing *Many Rivers to Cross*, in which the laughs and the excitement are so neatly blended that your heart is pounding while your mouth is chuckling.

The picture, made by MGM, stars Robert Taylor and Eleanor Parker, playing together for the third time as a romantic pair but the first time as a comedy team.

Bob plays a fur trapper, and Eleanor is a man trapper. At least, she does her best to catch her hero, hunting the hunter all over pioneer territory.

She is a girl who follows her beloved over mountains and rivers, along Indian trails and finally straight into ambush—and, once he has freed her from captivity, she manages to capture him.

There's a fine and famous supporting cast in the movie, headed by Victor McLaglen, as Eleanor's father—just the kind of swaggering, two-fisted but soft-hearted character for which Victor is famous. This, by the way, is his first part on the MGM lot in his 30-year screen career.

"I played for just about every other studio, even the ones long gone like Biograph and Famous Artists," Victor told me, "but never for MGM.

"But if this part is the first one they had that was right down my alley—well, it was worth waiting for."

Two of Eleanor's brothers are played by Russ Tamblyn and Jeff Richards, who were both such hits in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

Also included in the big cast are Rosemary De Camp, Josephine Hutchinson and Alan Hale, Jr.

Many Rivers to Cross was filmed almost entirely on location in Northern California, and the "many rivers" are really several differ-

ent scenes of one river, the Russian, as it's called.

To shoot it in color and Cinemascope on location required the use of MGM's "studio on wheels," a completely self-contained unit, which can operate independently anywhere it can be hauled.

The studio got the idea for this contraption from mobile TV units and adapted it to movie making.

The studio on wheels is always ready to go wherever it is needed, and by using it MGM avoids having to assemble a different collection of special equipment for each location-made picture.

The whole cast had a marvelous time on location. Instead of coming back to Hollywood with multiple sprains and bruises, as is usually the case when actors stray away from their regular beat, everyone was in one piece and blooming with health, happiness, and general good spirits.

"I can't remember ever having more fun making a picture," said Bob. "Nothing went wrong. Nobody got so much as an insect bite or a sunburned nose.

"And I got a real kick out of playing comedy," he added. "These high-powered heroes I always seem to specialize in sometimes get a little stuffy."

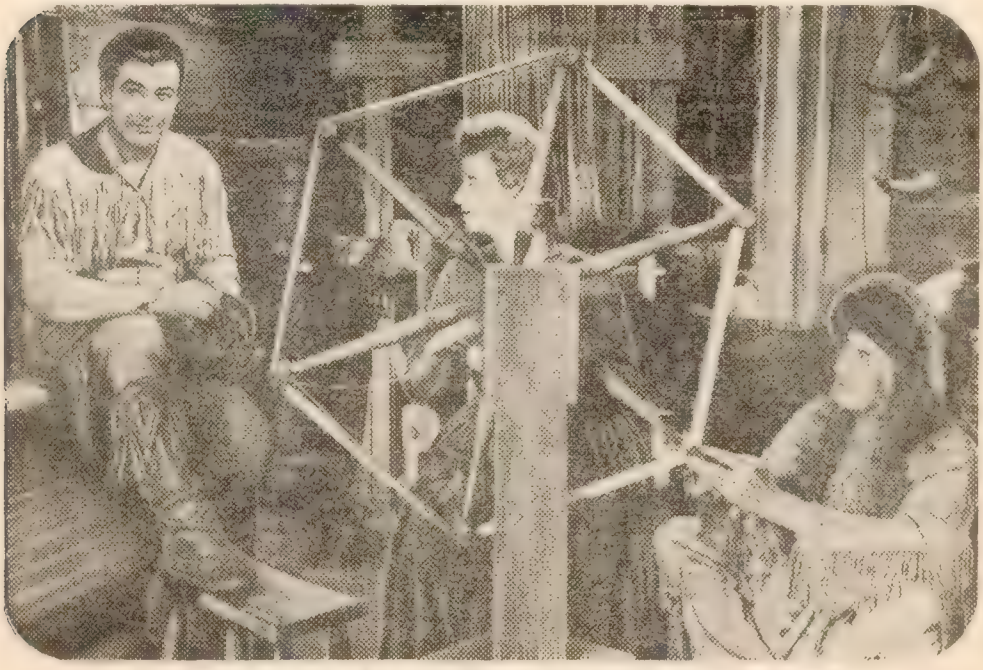
"Simpering heroines can get a little stuffy, too," Eleanor added.

"When I heard that I was playing the feminine lead in a Western again, I'll admit that I groaned.

"I could see myself as a proper young lady who swooned at the drop of a Stetson. But once I'd read the script I was delighted. This Western heroine has more get-her-man gumption than even the most liberated female of today."

I'll give you a tip, based on long experience. If the cast had a wonderful time making a movie, the chances are *you'll* have a wonderful time when you see it.

The enthusiasm of the actors somehow comes right out of the screen, so that you, the audience, feel it and share it. Look forward to an evening of lively entertainment when you see *Many Rivers to Cross*.



Eleanor Parker spins a web to get her man, Robert Taylor

ROBERT RYAN

Stardom Comes Second

EARLY in his career Robert Ryan decided that fame and fortune would always come second with him, and he's never changed his mind. He's always done the things that interested him without thinking much about whether they'd make him successful.

No actor in his right mind would accept a secondary part after he'd become a star. But Ryan does—if he likes the part. No actor with good sense would play the meanest, least sympathetic types of villains. But Ryan does—quite often.

Bob didn't even think of being an actor until he'd tried practically everything else—seaman, sandhog, cowboy, salesman, miner—you name it. Some of these jobs were for adventure's sake, and some were strictly for eating, but he enjoyed most of them for a while. The only job he ever had that he really hated bitterly was bill collecting, which was also very unprofitable because he used to split his salary with the poor folks he'd been dunning all week.

"That was when the depression was at its deepest," he told me. "Boy, it was really rough on some of those folks. Not so bad for me, of course. A guy with muscles could always dig roads for the WPA—and believe me, I didn't spend much time leaning on my shovel."

Still, it wasn't the kind of work a Dartmouth College graduate might have expected to do. But the only work he could get that didn't involve his muscles was even more distasteful, like the bill-collecting job and the time he was a photographer's model.

"I never really minded hard physical labor," says Bob, "but at the same time I had an urge to be artistic. Maybe it all started on my eighth birthday, when my mother gave me a violin and my father gave me a pair of boxing gloves."

He never did very well with the violin, but he got to be a star amateur boxer and was never defeated in four years of intercollegiate bouts.

Bob's real break came in the form of a $2,000 inheritance from a rich uncle. He was beginning to think he'd like to be an actor, so he made tracks for Hollywood and enrolled in a drama course.

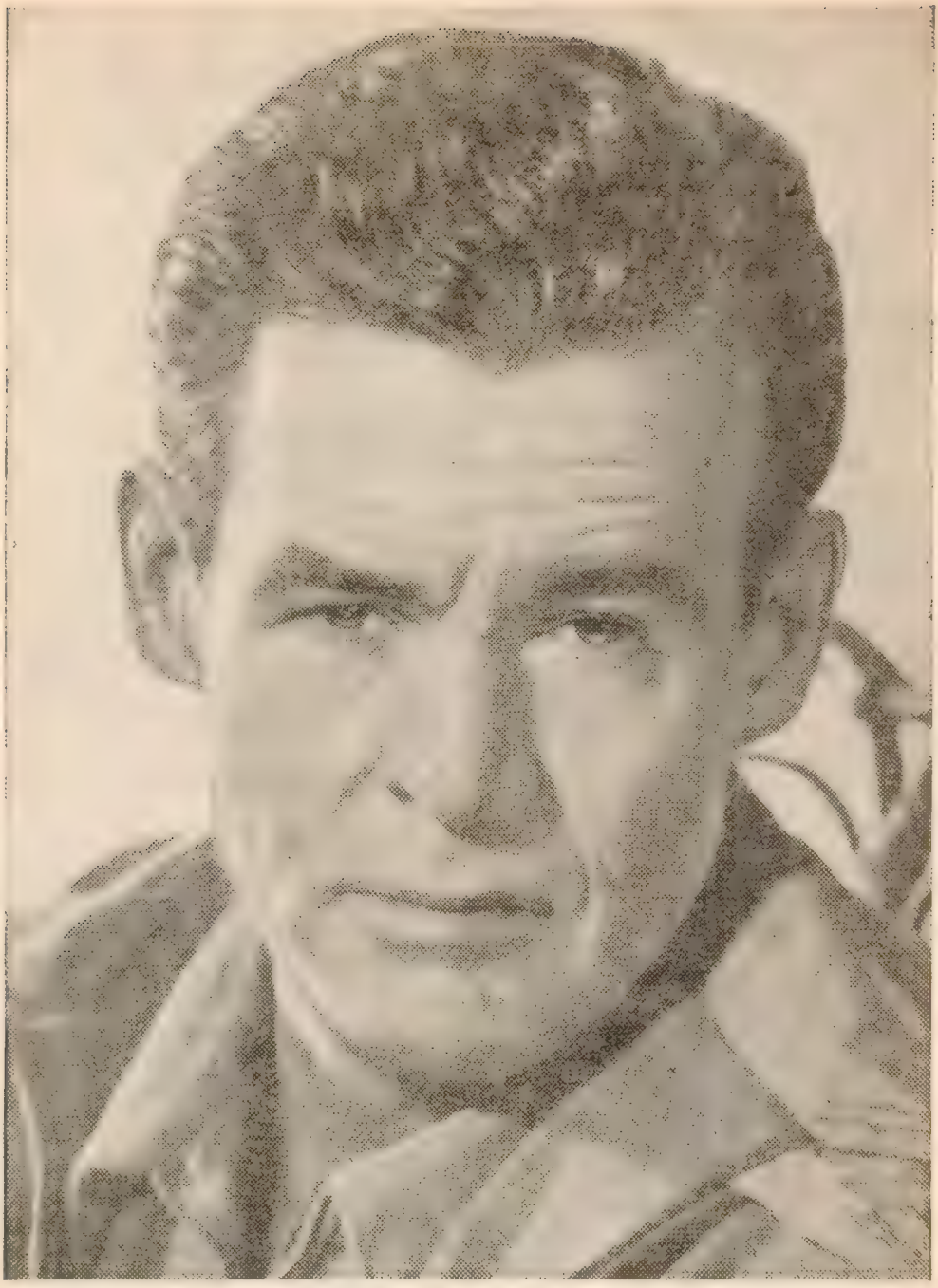
"They took my money," he says, "and when I'd finished the course they told me I wasn't the type for the movies."

But the school gave him something more important than a job in the movies—a bride. Bob and Jessie were married in 1939, after which they headed East to the straw-hat theaters, where they found that two could live almost as cheaply as one.

A talent scout saw him in a play with Luise Rainer but, by the time the scout was authorized to seek him out with a contract, he'd landed a part with Tallulah Bankhead and was heading for New York. In Philadelphia, however, the show folded because Tallulah came down with flu. So the talent scout thought he'd approach Ryan again.

And from the day when Bob put pen to contract, he's always been busy—not always making money, though, and not always boosting his career. Last year, for instance, he took time off to work in a Shakespearian drama in New York, at about one-tenth of his Hollywood salary. This year, he's playing a nasty villain again in MGM's *Bad Day at Black Rock*—and, let's face it, playing villains doesn't usually endear you to your fans.

Bob hopes his fans will bear with him. "I guess they will," he said grinning. "They've put up with so much so far I think they must be the most loyal fans in the world."



RKO

Bob's willing to risk his career—for a job that interests him

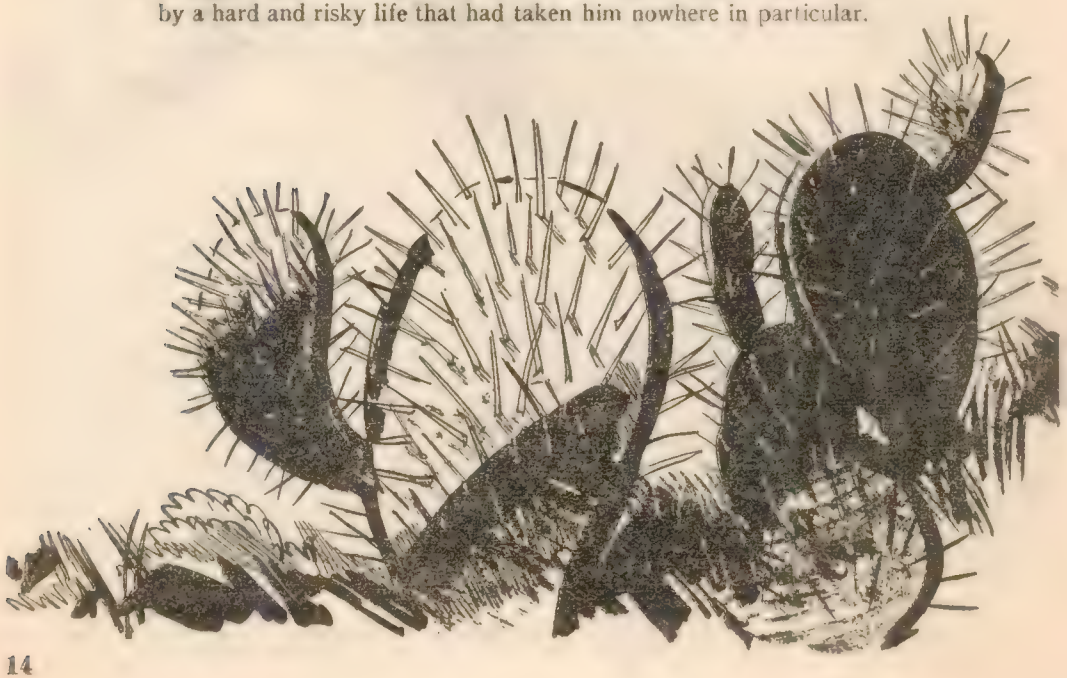
The Thin Line

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

THE camp was not an impressive layout. The tiny fire was dying now, within the circle of rocks upon which perched the blackened tin cans in which food had been cooked. Two bedrolls, with dirty cover tarps, were spread under a juniper tree. The two men lounged on them, smoking. They were tough-looking men, unshaved for many days, with trail dust caked thickly on their clothing where sweat had soaked through.

They were wary men who made no sound in the evening quiet. They listened, their eyes glinting in the light of the fire as they quested beyond it, sweeping the dry, hardscrabble range that could be seen from this vantage point on the knoll.

Lee Cardigan was one. He was a gaunt and rangy man of thirty, with rebellious black hair and a face that had been marked by a hard and risky life that had taken him nowhere in particular.



CARDIGAN LIKED the money that manhunting paid him . . . till he found that some things . . . like the love of a woman . . . aren't for sale

There was a hovering bitterness about his mouth, a brooding quiet in his eyes.

He flipped the stub of his cigarette into the fire now, and said, "He's getting close, Sam."

"I hear him." Sam Ortega—part Mexican, part Apache, but raised by American foster-parents—nodded his round, deceptively bland face. "Real close, and careful." Sam's stocky body stirred on his bedroll as he loosened his sixgun in its holster.

"Easy, Sam," Cardigan warned. "We're mean, but it doesn't buy us anything to overdo it."

A horse's hoof struck against a rock, somewhere in the gathering dark. The animal's breathing, labored after the climb up the knoll, became audible.

A man's voice called, "Hey, the camp!"

Cardigan rose to his feet. "Ride on in, stranger."

The newcomer swung past the dark bulk of a juniper and pulled rein so violently that the head of his horse was lifted high. He was a big man with the kind of skin that never becomes darkened by sun; its broiled redness was accented now by the light of the fire. His eyes had a washed-out, lusterless look beneath bleached brows.

"What are you two doing on Bent T range?" he demanded tightly.

Cardigan made an easy gesture. "We're camped here for the night, friend. We're driving some cattle through to the railroad up at Holbrook. I'm Cardigan and this this is Sam Ortega."

The rider put his weight on his stirrups, lifting his glance to the hobbled horses which grazed beyond the fire. Not enough light reached them for him to read the brands.

HE SAID, "What outfit are you working for?"

"You might say that we're on our own, friend," Cardigan answered.

The bushy white brows lowered. "How many cattle?"

"Around a hundred head, more or less."

"You damn fools, by morning they'll be mixed with ours from hell to breakfast!"

"Seems we've made a mistake, Sam," Cardigan said casually. Then, to the big man, "We didn't see any stock in the valley and figured it was empty range, a good spot for a layover."

"The stock's in the hills on the other side, where the graze and the water are. Yours have smelled the water and drifted up there by now." The red, square-jawed face lifted. "What do you aim to do about that?"

Cardigan shrugged. "We'll sort them out from yours, I reckon. If you could give us some help, we'd be glad to pay for it."

"I'm not making any fool roundup! Didn't they tell you in Wind River that nobody drives through this valley?"

"Sam and I stay away from the towns when we're making a drive, friend. We don't trust ourselves around saloons till a job is finished."

The big man squinted with sudden, knowing suspicion. "Maybe that isn't the main reason. Where'd you get that hundred head?"

"I didn't say." Cardigan's smile was thin, mocking.

"And don't aim to, I expect. I'm Ed Brock, foreman of the Bent T. What you fellers better do—" He broke off, tilting his head to one side and holding a sharpened regard upon Cardigan and Ortega, while he listened to the sound of a second horse that was coming up the knoll.

A feminine voice asked, "Ed, what's going on here? I saw the light of a fire, from the house. Who are those men?"

"I saw it too, Mrs. Tharp," Brock said, in a low voice that was not intended to reach Cardigan's ears, but did. "They're drifters that were shoving some stock through the valley. Hardcases, from the way they look, so the stock they've got mixed with your husband's is likely rustled stuff."

The woman had come up directly behind Brock, so that she had been concealed from Cardigan's view at first. Now she reined her sleek chestnut mare to one side and looked Cardigan over with frankly curious eyes.

He felt a stir of edgy distaste. Not for the woman; because of her. He had taken this job as a favor to an old friend, as well as for the reward it promised, but he hadn't liked it much at any time. And he hadn't known that Derek Tharp had a wife who would be involved in it.

She wasn't far past twenty, he thought. She was a fully-matured young woman, but

one unmarked as yet by the hardships of range life. She sat very straight in her saddle, her slim yet rounded body clothed in riding skirt and simple blouse. Her eyes were wide apart, and somehow they gave her face a somber cast that made her more than simply beautiful. Cardigan knew at once that here was a woman who had depth to her nature, a capacity for feeling that would reward a man. Derek Tharp, like many of his kind, was lucky when it came to women.

Cardigan took off his hat. "My partner and I have made a mistake, Mrs. Tharp," he said. "We'll straighten it out, get our stock untangled from yours just as soon as we can."

"You'd better." Catching her soft-looking underlip between her teeth, she glanced up at the dark and lowering clouds. Cardigan could read her thoughts. With a storm coming on, it was part of range custom for strangers, regardless of who they might be, to be invited to take shelter at ranch headquarters. And yet she held back.

BROCK seemed to sense her thinking too. He spurred forward, keeping his horse tight-reined. "Clear out, you two," he ordered harshly. "Your kind aren't wanted on Bent T range at any time."

Cardigan rested his hand on the worn grips of his gun, as he wondered if this Brock were evolving some scheme so the outfit could get a hundred-odd head of cattle for nothing. Without letting on that he had overheard Brock's earlier estimate of Sam Ortega and himself, he asked softly, "Just what kind do you think we are, bucko?"

The foreman's broad body lifted, feet splaying out from the sides of his mount. But something about this lean, capable-looking stranger whom he faced seemed to ring a warning in the foreman's mind.

He said lamely, "Strangers, I mean. The boss doesn't favor having them around."

A bluffer, Cardigan thought. This Brock was a nervous and sweaty man who didn't have much to back up his imposing appearance.

"Ed," the woman said sharply, "there's no need to be inhospitable. We've plenty of room for them in the bunkhouse. They can spend the night there and start cutting out their cattle in the morning."

"No!" Brock said explosively. "They aren't going to—"

"Ed." Her voice held an insistence that cut through the foreman's temper, silencing him. "I'm in charge while my husband is away. You'd better start getting used to that."

Cardigan's mind seized upon what she had said. So Derek Tharp was away. That would upset the careful plans that had been laid for this job of manhunting. But Cardigan was a rough and lusty man. Looking at the woman, alertly aware now of the restless loneliness that gave her eyes that somber look, he wasn't too sorry about her husband's absence.

That was the no-good side of Lee Cardigan, he reflected bitterly. But he had lived with himself too long to expect to be any different now, on his last job for the law.

Brock was looking at the woman with a sulky petulance. It seemed to Cardigan that the hombre had been given a pretty free hand up to now, and was set back by Mrs. Tharp's assumption of authority.

"Ma'am," Brock said thickly, "these drifters have a little jag of cattle that they're driving to the railroad—in a hurry, else they wouldn't have come through here. They're working it strictly on their own, Cardigan here admitted to me. What does that add up to?"

She gave Cardigan a long, direct look. "Mr. Cardigan, are you a cattle thief?"

"That's not a fair question, Mrs. Tharp. Would I admit it if I were?"

Her lips curled in scorn, and she looked away from him. Once again he found it easy to follow the working of her mind. Dirty and unshaven, marked by riotous living, he must be firmly pegged in her estimation as a cattle rustler.

In reality there weren't many of that kind any more. The law and the cattlemen's associations had tightened down, making the business too risky for most of those who once had followed it. Yet most people didn't know that. And the cattle that Sam and he had brought into this valley, if Brock or the wom-

an chose to inspect them, would show blotched brands and freshly trimmed away ear-crops.

The Pinkertons were willing to go to a lot of expense and trouble when they were after big game. Cardigan looked at the woman and wondered how much she knew about her husband's doings, while the old, sour distaste for his own predatory and rootless way of life stirred once again within him.

SHE seemed unaware of his scrutiny. "It doesn't make any difference what they are, Ed," she was saying. "If the cattle are stolen ones that's all the more reason for getting them cleared off our range as soon as possible. And I wouldn't leave even a thief out here in a storm." Abruptly she reined her horse away.

As they rode down from the knoll, with Mrs. Tharp well ahead of the men, Cardigan thought that this had come off fairly well after all. He had to get into the Bent T headquarters on a basis that would permit him to look around a little. Brock would try to prevent that, but Brock didn't count for much unless he had hired hands who would do his bidding and who possessed more guts than he had.

Brock's prompt decision to run Cardigan and Ortega off the range could have been prompted by one or the other of two things. Brock might suspect that they were the law, which didn't seem at all likely; or else there were things on the Bent T that he didn't want any stranger to see. In either case the Pinkertons were right about Derek Tharp.

Where did that leave Mrs. Tharp? Cardigan had to know more about her. Disregarding Brock's startled oath of disapproval, Cardigan spurred forward until his mount ranged up beside her mare.

She looked at him warily in the faint light. "Well?"

He touched his hat, saying, "It seemed to me you looked lonesome up here, ma'am."

Her scorn struck him like a lash. "When I settle for the company of a thief, that'll be a day!"

He shrugged. "I've heard that some thieves can be mighty good company."

She laughed lightly at that, while the horses ran steadily on with a pound of hoofs and a creaking of saddle leather. "I might have expected you to be crude. So we'd better make matters very plain, Mr. Cardigan. No one comes through this valley, but I go to town once in a while for supplies, and I'm accustomed to having men of a certain sort try to take advantage of the fact that I'm more or less of a grass widow. I carry a gun, Mr. Cardigan. It's a small one, but it can kill."

"No harm in a little talk, Mrs. Tharp. You mentioned that your husband is away. Do you expect him back soon?"

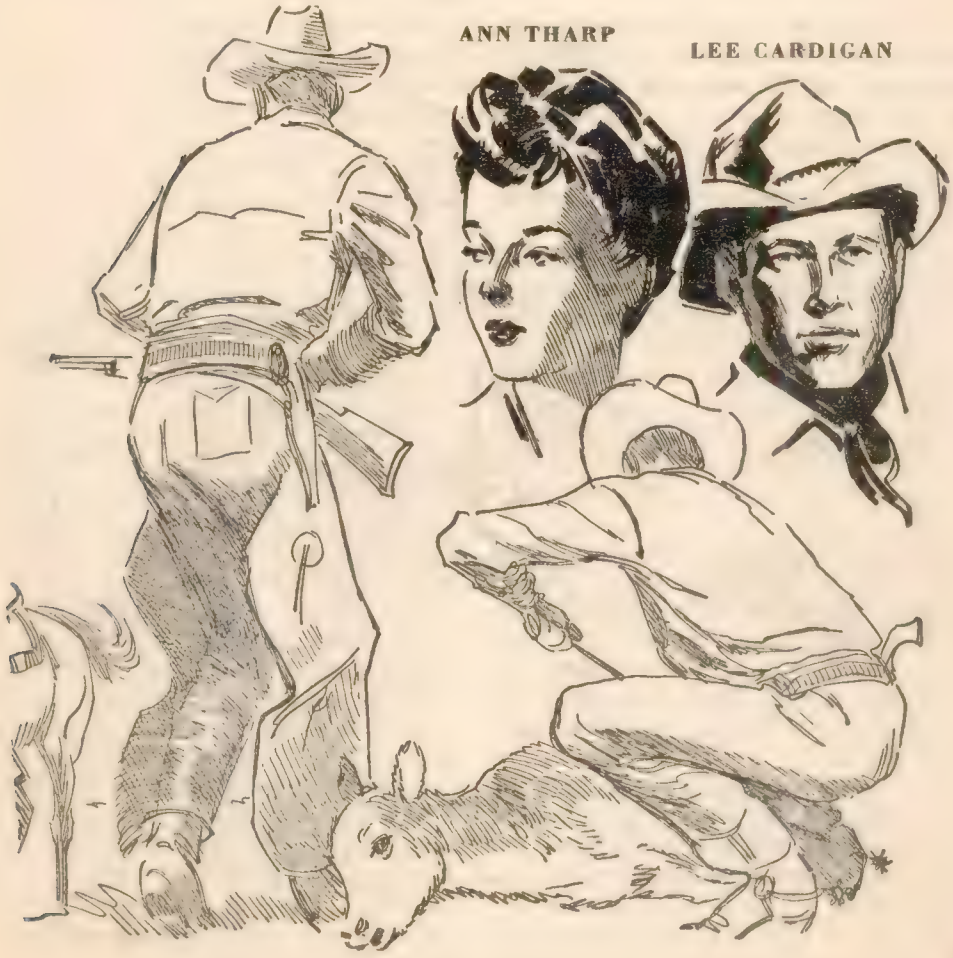
"No, I—" She looked quickly aside. "He's on a business trip. You see, we bought this ranch very cheaply, but we've found that the graze isn't good. Derek is looking for a better place." Watching him again with her somber eyes, she added, "How long will it take you to get your stock off our range?"

"Hard to say. Depends on the country, the brush, and so on."

"It's rough country."

"Then, as I told your foreman, if you could let part of your crew help us, we'd be glad to pay."

She was shaking her head. "We don't have a large crew, and my husband took all the men with him this time except for Ed." She glanced at him swiftly as if fearful that he would now, in spite of her previous words,



read into her hospitality something that she hadn't intended. "Incidentally," she added, "Ed is a very good shot."

Cardigan said, "All right, you don't need to keep warning me. I'm a no-good and you've put me in my place. But why does your husband need to take his whole crew on a ranch-buying trip?"

"To advise him. He's not very familiar with range and water conditions, and some of the men have had a lot of experience in such matters."

It was pretty thin, Cardigan thought. But a woman who was in love with a man would be inclined to believe anything he told her. This Mrs. Tharp seemed a frank sort of person; Cardigan doubted that she possessed the guile to be deceiving him in this.

She didn't know about her husband's real activities, then. That was going to make this case a mean one, one that Lee Cardigan would not recall with any pride in years to come. This time an innocent person was going to get hurt.

He swore softly under his breath.

THE ranch headquarters loomed before them at last, outlined briefly against the dark by a shaft of moonlight that reached down through the storm clouds. There was a small house, in poor repair yet neatly painted, with a yard in which flowers were bent far over by the rising wind. Corrals and outbuildings were below average. The whole place had a look that befitted the sparse, dry range that gave it life.

When they reined up at one of the corrals, Mrs. Tharp dismounted lithely and handed her reins over to Ed Brock. "When you've taken care of the horses," she said, "you'd better all come up to the house for coffee."

Coffee for thieves, Cardigan thought wryly when he tramped into the kitchen, was pretty good treatment.

There was a long table covered with oilcloth, which indicated that the small Bent T crew took their meals here in the house. The outfit wasn't prosperous enough to employ a regular cook.

The woman was busy at the stove, her cheeks made rosy by its heat, a lock of brown hair falling over one eye so that she had to pause and shove it back into place. She was taller than Cardigan had thought, but she was all woman.

She noticed the bold look he gave her in the lamplight and she turned slightly away, saying, "Sit down, all of you. Ed, get some cups."

Moving heavily across the creaky floor, the foreman opened a cupboard, put cups on the table, and then sat down opposite the chairs Cardigan and Ortega had taken. Brock was about forty-five, Cardigan judged. His lusterless eyes watched the strangers with a sulky alertness.

The coffee was good. Along with it Mrs. Tharp served some sugary rolls of a sort Cardigan had never tasted before. When she rose to refill the cups, she said, "Will you put some wood in the stove, Ed? I've got to heat dishwater."

Muttering, Brock went to the woodbox.

Mrs. Tharp came around the end of the table and poured coffee into Cardigan's cup when he lifted it. He sensed a sudden movement of her left hand, but by then it was too late. The round hard muzzle of a gun pressed against his head just behind his ear. By rolling his eyes he saw that she gripped a little pistol that she must have taken from the pocket of her skirt.

"Careful, Mr. Cardigan," she warned. "And you, too," she added, to Sam Ortega. "You wouldn't want to do anything that might get your friend shot." After setting down the coffeepot without spilling any of its contents, she reached for Cardigan's holstered gun and lifted it free of the leather.

Sam Ortega looked across at Cardigan with startled sooty eyes. Brock moved with sudden vigor, throwing down the pieces of wood he had in his hands and darting forward to wrench Sam's gun from its holster. Sam swore in Spanish and came half out of his chair, but at Cardigan's nod he stopped.

Mrs. Tharp put Cardigan's gun in the cupboard and then slipped her own tiny weapon back into the pocket of her skirt. Brock was covering Cardigan and Sam now, with Sam's gun. The foreman's red face was suffused with triumph.

"You see, Ed?" the woman said, wiping her hands on her skirt. "This is much better than letting them run loose as you were going to do, perhaps to take some of our stock with them when they leave the valley. Keep them covered, Ed. Watch them every minute from now on."

"Yeah," the foreman breathed. "I got to hand it to you, Ann. I'll watch them, you bet."

So her name was Ann. It fitted her, Cardigan thought. Lifting his cup, he looked at her over its brim.

"You're quite a woman. I don't recall that I ever met one before that had any nerve to speak of."

Her glance wavered as color flooded her cheeks. Perhaps, he thought, that was reaction. "Finish your coffee," she said, "and get on down to the bunkhouse. When you've gathered your cattle and start to drive them out of the valley you'll get your guns back."

CARDIGAN lay in his bunk that night, listening to the steady pound of the rain on the sheet-iron roof. For the first time in his career he had been disarmed, and by a woman at that. He wanted to laugh about it, but it wasn't funny. By lifting his head he could see the glow of the cigarette that Ed Brock smoked as he sat on a box by the bunkhouse door.

Sam Ortega had been snoring in his bunk, across from Cardigan, for some time now. But Cardigan's mind kept flitting restlessly from one thing to another. Ann Tharp wasn't a happy woman, and a woman like her should be happy. Maybe, though she didn't know exactly what Derek Tharp was doing, some deep intuition had warned her that something was wrong.

But there were no signs of sudden prosperity about this place. It looked like just what it was, a hardscrabble outfit on poor graze. Perhaps the Pinkertons had been wrong this time; Cardigan found himself hoping that they were. A married woman tended to weave the whole fabric of her life about her man. It would be plain hell for her if her husband were exposed as a thief and killer.

Cardigan shook his head in the darkness, remembering now the day when John Turcoe had hunted him up in Santa Fe. Turcoe was a dry, brusque little man with no compunctions about horning in at times when more discreet men would have backed off. He had found Cardigan strolling in the plaza with a young lady who'd been pretty gay until John's remarks sent her flouncing off in a huff.

"Still the ladies' man, eh?" Turcoe had said, sitting down on a bench and stretching his stubby legs out in front of him.

Cardigan had watched him guardedly. Turcoe wasn't much to look at; he was past sixty, afflicted with rheumatism now, and seemed to become smaller and more compact every year. In his time he'd been a frontier marshal, a trouble-shooter for the railroads, then a special agent for Wells Fargo, and a dozen other things. This dry little hombre was one who made law enforcement a business that paid him a steady profit.

"What do you want this time, John?" Cardigan had asked.

"There's a job you can handle for me, up in Utah." Turcoe removed a brown envelope from the inside pocket of his coat. "Near a place called Wind River. Man by the name of Tharp, Derek Tharp. Easterner. Good family, but got in trouble as a youngster and came West. Wanted to prove he was tougher than the ones he'd heard about out here, I guess, so he—"

"Leave off it, Sam." Sitting down on the bench, Cardigan had tilted back his hat. "I'm through with that kind of work."

"At thirty? Hell, you'll never quit. You like the money too well."

"It's time I was settling down. As for the money, I've saved it—twenty thousand, in a Denver bank. I'm going to start a cattle ranch at a place I've got picked out, and marry some homely woman and raise kids. You can visit us sometimes and eat hot apple pie in the kitchen."

"You won't find that here in Santa Fe. Come off the daydream, bucko—your taste runs to bright lights and the rustle of silk. Now about this Tharp: he's been in trouble before, plenty of it. Two or three killings, which he got tagged as self-defense, so we can't get at him that way. Two years in Yuma for bank robbery. A few years ago he dropped out of sight but now he's working again, slick

and careful. Six foot one, quick-moving, wears his mustache short and his yellow hair long. Handsome young buck."

"Not interested, John. Go away from me so I can catch up on my sleep."

"You'll get interested in a minute. Times are changing, Lee. As the country gets settled the law tightens down. Brands are recorded now. The telegraph can send word of a bank job, say, farther in a matter of minutes than any man can ride in weeks. The old boys can't cope with it. They're settling down to penny-ante stuff or starving out and leaving the business altogether.

"Tharp's made of different timber, smart enough to change with the times. Uses things like the railroads to get him across the country in a hurry. He and some friends of his jumped a cattle train at a water stop, rode it on into Kansas City. There he posed as the representative sent along by the owner of the cattle, and collected the money from their sale."

LEE CARDIGAN was watching Turcoe's weathered, rock-firm old face. "Didn't the owner have a man on the train?"

"A section crew found him, lying in some brush beside the track. He lived. But the brakeman who'd seen him thrown off the train, and tried to stop Tharp, didn't get off so lucky. He died when he fell. The rest of the crew thought he was sleeping and didn't tumble to what had happened at all. The railroad wants Derek Tharp and they've turned the case over to the Pinkertons."

"Let the Pinks get him then. He's identified."

"It isn't positive. Hair, age, the way he moved—the cattle buyer in K. C. remembered that much. Nobody got a good look at his face. Once he'd taken over, his help got off the train at the next stop, and Tharp stayed down in the cars, claiming he had to keep the cattle from bunching and trampling each other. When he came up from there he'd put a bandage over his face. Said a horn had gouged him."

"You seem to know all about what he did. Go get him yourself, John."

"This isn't the old days. The law works both ways now. If we take him without proof he'll tie us in knots with things like habeas corpus, and slide out of it. And I'm too well known. If I go near him he'll scare out and cover everything up. He's got that money somewhere near him—either that or bank slips showing deposits he's made under false names. Around twenty thousand dollars he got from that cattle sale. That's our evidence.

"Your job is to get on the inside and find the proof. We figure he might have done a little cattle rustling up there around Wind River. You drift in there with a few blotted-brand steers. If Tharp wants to buy, stall him and suggest that you'd like to throw in with him. Scout around his ranch. If you find anything to hit him with, any stolen cattle at all, jail him and we'll search his place. Otherwise you'll have to find the evidence some other way."

"Nice, clean work, John, as usual. I'm glad I gave it up."

"Somebody's got to do it. This is another of those matters the law can't handle by itself. And that brakeman's wife, with a bunch of fatherless kids, would thank you for dirtying your hands."

"You wore that one out long ago."

"All right, then, here's one you'll listen to! The railroad has put up a five-thousand-dollar reward, and the owner of the cattle will match that amount. I'll pay your expenses and take my usual cut. You get eight thousand dollars for a couple of weeks' work. Sam Ortega's looking for a job, I hear; take him along." Turcoe got to his feet, grimacing with pain. "The government is interested in this case because the cattle were taken across state lines. We'll get you sworn in as deputy U. S. marshal."

Eight thousand dollars, Cardigan had thought. No, twenty-eight thousand, when it was added to his present stake. It meant finer cattle and more of them, for the ranch he wanted. Lee Cardigan was hooked again, and he knew it.

WHEN Cardigan awakened, he began thinking about Ann Tharp almost at once. Turcoe had kept quiet about Tharp's having a wife although, knowing the old man's thoroughness, Cardigan was sure that Turcoe must have known about her.

It might be that Turcoe had feared Cardigan would back off from a case in which a woman could be hurt. But there was also the ugly possibility that Turcoe had known Tharp was away from his place, and had hoped that Cardigan would become friendly with the woman and could get her to tell him of her husband's activities.

Cardigan swore softly in the gray gloom of dawn. It was a dirty business, this one. He wasn't an outright bounty hunter; more often than not there was no reward connected with his cases, just good, quick pay for his services. A man could take his risks and collect his money and then sit back and enjoy life for a spell.

An easy life, some would call it. Ten years ago, at the very beginning of it, young Lee Cardigan had looked upon himself as a crusader of a sort. The West had been booming, wide open, a place where money flowed freely and the sharpers flocked in to skim the cream while they could.

Gunmen and thieves, crooked promoters and thimbleriggers and all the rest of them, preyed upon those who sweated to dig ore and raise cattle. In many places the law had been weak and in need of help. In others the law had been downright crooked, and Turcoe and Cardigan had been sent in by higher authority to clean things up. It had been a hazardous, well-paid occupation.

Things had taken a different cast in Cardigan's mind of late. In dealing with thieves a man had to be tougher and shrewder and more ruthless than they in order to survive. He had to beat them at their own game, sometimes trapping them, sometimes resorting to the use of informers and less savory methods of obtaining evidence. Maybe it infected a man in the long run, made him resemble more and more the people he dealt with.

Cardigan had to admit that he still enjoyed the excitement of the hunt, the thrill of danger that came when he wondered if, this time, he were stalking someone shrewder than he.

But he wanted out. Maybe he was getting old, but he wanted something different, something with real values in it. And yet he had risen once again to the old bait of money. That could be a sign of weakness, a sign that the easy plush life had undermined his will.

Once again he swore at himself.

From somewhere outside came the clang of a triangle. Ed Brock rose stiffly to his feet, saying, "Roll out, you two."

Cardigan took the time to shave, with cold water, at the bench outside the bunkhouse door. As he winced to the pull of the razor in his heavy dark beard, he saw that Sam Ortega was watching him with a glint of knowing amusement in his eyes.

When the three men trooped into the welcome warmth of the kitchen, Ann Tharp was placing dishes on the table. She'd had her darkly glossy brown hair done up in some manner last night, but now it fell in a rich and wavy mass at her back, swaying with each lithe movement of her body. She wore a robe that was buttoned almost to her neck, with an inch of muslin nightgown exposed at the bottom of it.

"Sit down, boys," she said. Then, after glancing toward Cardigan, she smiled as if to herself and added, "You look as if you hadn't slept too well, Mr. Cardigan. Were you worrying about being delayed here so long that someone might find you?"

"It's just that I'm not used to sleeping indoors," Cardigan lied.

HER glance shifted to his hands, and she smiled once more. Instantly Cardigan realized that his hands gave him away. Easy living had softened them; the work he had done in blotting brands and driving the cattle he had borrowed—they belonged to a man in Moab, a man who owed John Turcoe a favor—had not been enough to make his hands look like those of a man who lived and worked in the open. He was going to have to watch out, he thought, for this Ann Tharp.

When the men sat down at the table Brock took a position at its end and laid his six-gun beside his plate.

The woman turned from the stove saying, "I've been thinking about those cattle of yours, Cardigan. You said you'd be willing to pay for the work of our crew if they helped you separate the stock. Well, we have no crew, but Ed could ride to town and hire men for a day or two. That way you

wouldn't be delayed."

"No," Brock said sharply, "that's no good, ma'am."

She kept watching Cardigan, but she spoke to Brock. "Why not?"

The ramrod's lusterless eyes shifted uneasily. If Cardigan had ever seen a man whose mind was groping for some plausible-sounding lie, Brock was that man. "Derek doesn't want strangers out there," Brock said lamely. "He—he and I are trying some ideas we have for breeding better beef stock, and we don't want word of it to get out."

"I didn't know that," Ann Tharp said coolly. "But Cardigan and his friend are strangers, aren't they?"

Brock squirmed. "Well, it's a little different with them. They're just passing through."

She glanced toward Brock's red face now, in a way that made Cardigan wonder if she had been testing the man. If she had begun to suspect Brock it might mean that she suspected her husband too.

Cardigan said, "That was just talk, about Sam and me paying for the help. We haven't got any money. But we're pretty good at cutting stock, and—" there was mild, smiling sarcasm in this—"I reckon your foreman is a top hand. If the three of us go right at it we ought to be able to untangle that stock in a day or two."

"I'm sure you can," Ann Tharp said in a distant, thoughtful way. "I'll help, too."

Brock's red face lifted in a way that said he didn't like to have her go out where the cattle were. But he said nothing.

No more was said about the cattle during the meal. Sam Ortega glanced toward Cardigan from time to time, and it wasn't hard for Cardigan to guess what thinking was going on behind the 'breed's bland face. Brock didn't want strangers on the Bent T range, yet now he was more or less cornered, forced to take Cardigan and Ortega out there. It might be that he was not too worried about what a pair of drifting cattle thieves might learn. It might be that his crafty mind was toying with the thought that something could be made to happen to them, out there, and no one would know.

When the meal was finished Cardigan stood up and moved toward the door. As he passed Ann Tharp he said, "Thanks, ma'am, for the hospitality."

She looked at him briefly. "There's no need to be sarcastic. I'm sure you understand that we have to be careful about our stock. My husband can't afford to lose—"

"No sarcasm was intended," he said roughly, cutting her off. "I was aiming to thank you for giving us shelter and grub, nothing more than that. You're a mighty fine cook, Mrs. Tharp."

Her eyes lifted swiftly to his face again, and then fell away. In that moment Lee Cardigan was sure that she was a woman who was made unhappy by her inner suspicions and misgivings about her husband's doings. She couldn't be sure of him and so she couldn't be sure of herself.

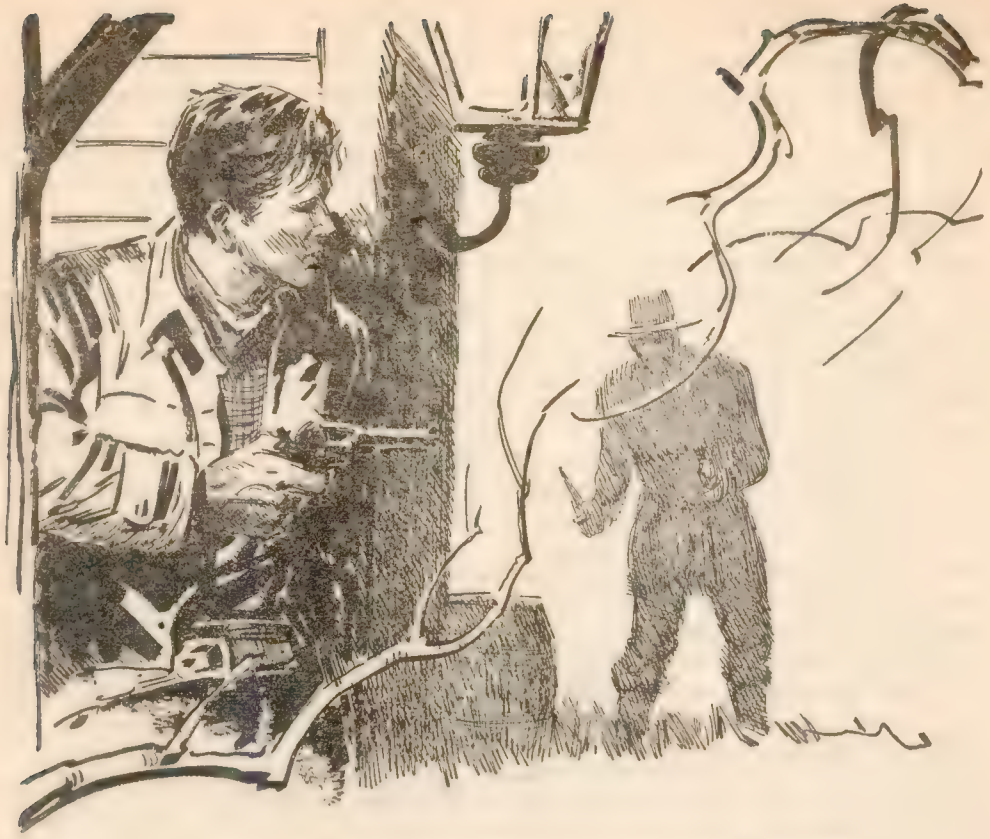
Marriage shouldn't be like that for any woman, much less for one as young and vital as Ann Tharp. She deserved a strong and steady man who would stay by her side and give her confidence in their life together. Cardigan felt a stir of deep anger. And that was crazy, he thought at once; he was angry with Tharp because he didn't treat his woman right, but the real basis for it was that Cardigan wished that *he* might be the kind of man she needed, and knew that he wasn't.

AS HE went on he wondered why a woman like Ann would marry a man like Derek Tharp. He had observed that women often favored the flashy, no-good sort of man. But this one seemed different from the rest; she had a subtle inner glow of fineness and worth that set her apart. And she was no fool, either. She was beginning to wise up. He wondered how much she really knew and concealed.

When he reached the doorway he noticed the little mirror that was fastened to the wall beside it. Stepping over to it, he bent his knees to bring his face down to its level, and glanced at his reflection. He saw a man with a lean and bony face, prominent black brows, bold eyes, the trace of an old scar on one temple—a wicked-looking no-good, he thought.

"You're frowning, Cardigan," Ann's voice said. "Don't you like what you see?"

"Not particularly," he said, and left.



A furtive stir of movement down the alley warned Cardigan

At the horse corral the three men caught and saddled their mounts. The rain was over now, and the air was clean and sweet-smelling, with a tang of wet sage. Since Ann Tharp had said that she would be riding out to help them, they saddled her mare as well. Brock left the sleek little horse tied to a gate-post when they rode away.

The Bent T range turned out to be rough country, all right. The foothills that bordered the valley on its eastern side were slashed by canyons that branched and twisted every which way. The grass and the water were in these canyons.

Cardigan's stock had found that water and graze, with the unerring instinct possessed by all range cattle after a long hard drive. They were mixed with the Bent T cattle now. A few of them were in one of the canyons, and a few had wandered into each of the others, probably.

Ed Brock leaned on his saddlehorn, looking down into one of the canyons, and swore. "You fools ought to have known this would happen! Get down there and start cutting your mangy critters out. I'll swing over to the next canyon and see how many are there."

Sam Ortega gave Cardigan a sly glance as they rode down into the canyon. "Real nice of him," Sam said, "to turn us loose so we can look around on our own."

Cardigan shrugged and ignored Sam's bland malice. "It may be there's no misbranded stock except our own in this particular gulch."

"Yeah, sure. There's something off-color around here, though. Brock was mighty upset when he found we'd drifted in. The woman's

worried too, and wants to get rid of us pronto. The way Brock kept watching us at breakfast gave me an itch between my shoulder blades. It might be he's figured out a way to handle us, eh?" Sam glanced around uneasily. "I'd rather he'd stayed close where we could watch him."

When they reached the floor of the canyon they found that most of the cattle were clustered near its lower end, around a water trough. The Bent T cattle were a mixture of tall, scrubby-looking stocker cows and calves that had not yet been branded. Some of the calves were yearlings, some were two- and three-year-olds. No branding had been done here for a long time.

Sam looked at the calves with sharpening interest. "So they're building a special breed, eh? Hell! There's just about everything here. Brock's too lazy even to keep up his branding. Maybe he holds his job because he's got something on Tharp."

"We'll shove them all up the canyon, Sam," Cardigan said, interrupting him. "Then we'll cut out our stuff and drift it back down."

They had driven the stock part way up the canyon when Sam suddenly spurred ahead, shook out his loop and dropped it over the head of an unbranded yearling. He busted the calf hard, went down his taut rope, and sat on the animal's shoulder.

"Come take a look," he called.

CARDIGAN dismounted and went over. Sam's round face grinned up at him. "Tharp's earmark, I noticed on his cows, is a swallowtail on the left side. What's this critter got?"

"Nothing," Cardigan said, frowning, "that I can see. He hasn't been branded."

"Look closer, friend." Sam thumbed the critter's right ear. It was hairy; the small but definite underbit, the size of half a two-bit piece, was hardly visible until a man looked for it. "They'd have noticed this if they hadn't been too lazy—or too busy with other matters—to do their branding," Sam said.

Cardigan squatted on his heels, looking glumly at the ground. This was a lucky find. But for Ann Tharp's welfare it wasn't lucky at all. It was evidence, the sort of proof that Turcoe had advised Cardigan to get as a weapon to hit Tharp with. Sometimes in the heat of branding work a calf that had been earmarked escaped before the branding iron burned its pattern on him. But the underbit would be registered in the name of the calf's rightful owner, along with his brand.

Tharp had been prudent in his doings. The rustling of branded cattle had gotten to be a dangerous business, and so he had swung over to gathering a few slick-ears and mavericks here and there, probably driving them long distances to his home range where he could use them to build up a herd. This yearling had been included in some such hasty night-time gather, its earmark passing unnoticed.

"You think all those stocker cows had twin calves or better?" Sam Ortega prodded now.

Frowning, Cardigan thought that Sam was right. There were too many calves here for the number of cows—too many by far. Cardigan had what he needed now, the entering wedge, the club to use on Derek Tharp. Arrest him, Turcoe had said, and then search his place.

But Tharp wasn't here.

Sam made a low grunt of warning. Without moving his head he was looking up at the rim of the canyon. Cardigan looked too, his hand falling automatically to his holster and finding it empty, and saw the mounted figure of Ed Brock wheel around and disappear beyond the rim.

Brock hadn't gone over to the next canyon, but had lingered around to watch the strangers and see what they would do. He had set his trap for them and they had fallen into it. Well, Brock had gotten an eyeful, Cardigan thought. It had been easy for him to see that it wasn't one of their own cattle they'd roped. Brock knew, now, that they had more than a casual interest in the Bent T stock. It was probable that he was shrewd enough to suspect that they were lawmen.

The drumming sound of retreating hoofs reached their ears. "He's lighting out," Cardigan said. "We'd better see where he goes."

They leaped into their saddles and rode, quartering up the steep slope, to the rim of the canyon. There they saw that Brock wasn't heading back to ranch headquarters.

The ramrod was far out on the valley floor, riding swiftly toward the hills on the opposite side, and presently the hills swallowed up his dwindling figure.

"Let's go, Sam," Cardigan said. "He might figure on leading us into those hills and laying for us there, but I doubt it. He could have shot us awhile ago if he'd had guts enough. Wind River's over that way and it's my guess he's heading for town."

The guess proved to be true. Brock's trail led directly to a road that meandered down another valley and entered the dusty, ramshackle little town. Brock's horse, with patches of dried lather still clinging to its sides, stood in slack-hipped exhaustion in front of the telegraph office.

"Keep an eye on him, Sam," Cardigan directed, "but keep out of sight. I'm going to find out what sort of lawman they've got here."

THE sheriff's office, which Cardigan located after bracing a leather-aproned blacksmith at the rear of his shop to ask directions, was on a side street. The sheriff was a leathery-faced oldster who said his name was Vincent.

He looked Cardigan over and inquired guardedly, "What can I do for you?"

Cardigan sank into a chair. "I'm interested in the Bent T outfit."

"Buying, maybe? I heard that the Tharps wanted to sell."

Cardigan had taken his deputy marshal badge from the pocket where he kept it. He showed it to Vincent, then put it away again.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "So that's the way the wind blows. I've been wondering when this would come."

"What made you think it would?"

"No definite reason I could name. The Tharps came here about three years ago and bought that abandoned spread over in Dry Valley. They've had a hard time of it out there. A little too hard, I suspect, for what Ann Tharp hoped to do."

"Anything against Tharp here? Any complaints of rustling?"

"None." The breeze, coming through the open window, stirred the sheriff's fine, silvery-white hair; he lifted a hand to smooth it down, at the same time giving Cardigan a look that seemed to reproach him for something.

"Any mavericking?" Cardigan asked bluntly.

"None that I've heard of." The sheriff leaned forward. "Just what have you got in mind?"

Cardigan had been right about the source of those calves, then; they had come from some distant range. He smiled faintly and said nothing, waiting the sheriff out. Finally Vincent made a gesture of irritation and said, "You big guns are all close-mouthed. Well, as far as this office is concerned Tharp is clean. Knowing something about his past record, I kept a close eye on him at first. On Mrs. Tharp's account, partly—she's a fine young lady and she has my sympathy. Any woman who marries a man and then tries to reform him—"

"The reforming didn't take, then?"

"Don't try to put words in my mouth, young feller. Tharp has never been in any trouble here, aside from a couple of saloon fights when he first came. He can be a likable cuss when he wants to, but he can be overbearing sometimes too. He keeps everybody out of his valley, which is his right if he hankers for privacy."

"Has he shown any signs of sudden prosperity lately?"

The sheriff's eyes widened with surprise; then he gave Cardigan a hard, steady look. "You've got me in a corner. I reckon it's my duty to help you, much as I hate to see things blasted out in the open so Mrs. Tharp will get hurt. Tharp's got one recent luxury that might come pretty high. A woman."

Cardigan's face must have mirrored his astonishment. Knowing Ann Tharp, he hadn't been at all prepared for this.

The sheriff gave him a thin smile and went on, "A Mrs. Cassiter. A widow, from the East. She came here right after Tharp got back from his last trip out. She's young and on the flossy side, though she seems to be fairly respectable as far as the other women in town can make out, and you know how close they watch one like that. Gives music lessons to the kids, but the money she gets from that doesn't buy a tenth of the fancy

clothes she wears. Tharp spends most of his time with her when he's around here."

"Doesn't Mrs. Tharp know about that?"

The sheriff shrugged meaningfully. "She doesn't come into town to visit with the womenfolk like she used to. And I'm sure not going to be the one to tell her. Most people feel the same about it. Nobody wants to break things up for Ann Tharp."

CARDIGAN'S hands closed slowly and made fists on his thighs. It was always this way in law work. You smelled along the trail of a man's life and gradually you found out all about him, learned his weaknesses and found something to hit him with. This time was different in only one way; this time an innocent person was going to get hurt.

"Vincent," he said, "I want you to do something for me. Tharp's foreman is at the telegraph office. I want to know what message he's sending and who it was sent to."

"You've got authority—"

"No," Cardigan cut in. "The badge that you saw is a matter between you and me. To everybody else around here I'm just a drifter until I move in on Tharp."

Vincent rose and took down his hat from a deer antler on the wall. "All right, Cardigan." He paused, then asked, "What's Tharp done to get the Federal authorities after him?"

"Plenty."

Vincent grunted. "I should have known better than ask." Then he went out.

He was gone a long time. Cardigan got to his feet after a while and looked out slantwise through the front window. By looking down the side street he could see that Brock's horse was still in front of the telegraph office. Brock must be waiting for an answer to his message. The sheriff was nowhere in sight. He too must be waiting, somewhere, for Brock to leave the telegrapher's.

Cardigan sat down again.

Vincent returned to the office in about an hour. "Brock sent a message to Tharp, at a hotel in Denver, and got an answer," he reported. "Must be that they've got some kind of code between them. The message Brock sent said that some wild horses had drifted in and asked what to do about them. Tharp's answer was that he should pen them up if he could, and—this part wasn't in the code, I guess—it said that Tharp would be back as soon as he could and for Brock to watch the house meanwhile. Maybe that last part was code after all, though. Why would he want Brock to watch the house?"

Cardigan knew. He was remembering that shrewd old John Turcoe had said that Tharp would have his winnings hidden away in a secure place. They were in the house at the Bent T, Ann Tharp's house. But Cardigan didn't mention that part of it to the sheriff.

Vincent was eyeing him closely. "I don't aim to keep prying, but what's this going to mean for Mrs. Tharp?"

"It's going to be rough on her," Cardigan said. "About as rough as it could be. Well, thanks for the help, sheriff. I may be calling on you again."

Vincent lifted a thin, strong-looking hand. "One thing more—a warning for you. Mrs. Tharp used to visit with my wife quite a lot. The missus and I got to know that girl. Ann isn't one of those clinging, spineless women. It took courage for her to bring that no-good man of hers out here and jab him into trying to make a go of ranching on hardscrabble range. She'll fight you like a wildcat, trying to protect her husband no matter what he's done. She's that kind. And a woman's bullet can kill you just as dead as any. It isn't that I care much what happens to *you*. I just don't want Ann to add to her troubles by killing an officer."

"You and your wife think a lot of her, eh?"

"We do."

Cardigan said somberly, "I'll make it as easy for her as I can," and went out of the office.

SAM ORTEGA was waiting in the alley behind the blacksmith shop. "Brock went into the saloon and then rode out with two hombres," Sam said. "They headed out the road we came in on."

Cardigan nodded. "Go hoist a drink or two if you want, Sam. I'll go on out and see what Brock and his friends are up to. You can catch up with me on the way."

Sam eyed Cardigan's empty holster and

then glanced down at his own. "All I want to do is buy me a gun. Aren't you going to get one?"

"No. Two-hit rustlers such as we're supposed to be couldn't afford it. Remember, I've told Mrs. Tharp that we're broke. The evidence we need is in the house: I found that out from a message Brock received from Tharp. I've got to gain Mrs. Tharp's confidence and get a good look around inside that house."

Sam's face took on a smirking look. "You'll not make any headway with her, my friend. That one's no hussy. But you better wait around for me so we can leave here together. Brock and those other two—"

"I'll watch them from a safe distance. Take your time. It might be a while before we get to town again. Tharp is on his way back."

Cardigan was careful, in one way, as he rode out toward the ranch. He jogged along without hurry, scanning the trail ahead to make certain that Brock and his companions hadn't turned off anywhere. But in another way he was not careful at all. When his horse lifted its ears and looked toward some big rocks at one side of the canyon he was passing through, he paid scant attention. Brock's trail still was plainly laid out ahead of him, and his mind was busy with other matters.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw three riders spurt out into the open. He pulled rein, knowing that he was well within pistol range, and waited.

They had gone on well past the rocks to leave a trail for him to see, and they they had circled back along the side of the canyon to reach their hiding place. That didn't matter now. What mattered was the careful way in which two of them, who had the look of saloon bums who'd do anything to pick up a few dollars, circled to get behind Cardigan while Brock approached him with pistol uptilted and ready.

"Get down," Brock said when he neared Cardigan. The foreman's red face held a look of wild and unsteady excitement. His glance reached eagerly to Cardigan's empty holster; then he seemed to ease off somewhat. "I said get down!"

[*Turn page*]

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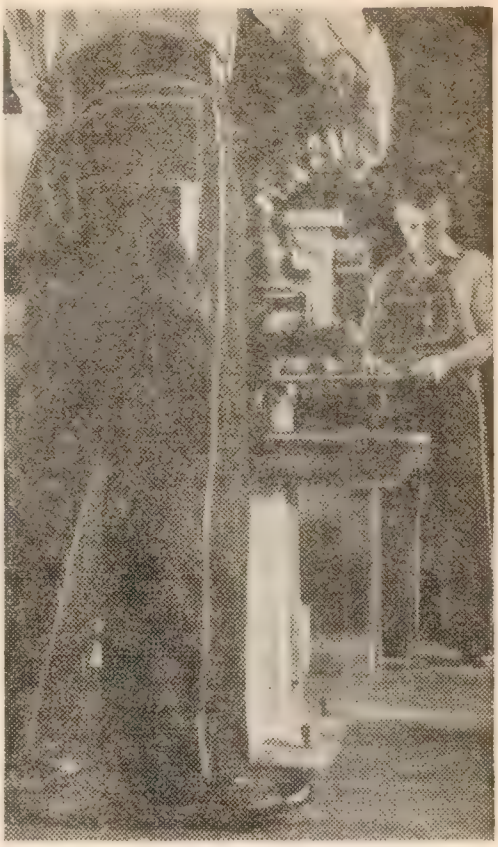

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The other two had come up behind Cardigan now. One of them jabbed his back with the muzzle of a gun. He shrugged and stepped down from his saddle.

Brock and the others dismounted hurriedly. The foreman stood with his boots apart, saying, "Hold him for me, boys."

A feeling of trapped alarm coursed through Cardigan as he began to understand what was planned here. He wrenched against the sudden grip of the whisky-smelling pair who had seized his arms. Then Brock struck him in the face, twice.

The blows made meaty sounds and snapped Cardigan's head first to one side and then to the other.

Brock grinned wickedly, his nostrils flaring wide as he drew a deep breath. "All right, start talking, you damn John Law! Where's the other one?"

Cardigan spat and felt the warm, salty taste of blood in his mouth. He didn't say anything.

Brock made a grunt of anger and moved in close, driving his big fists into Cardigan's belly in a swift, punishing succession of blows. Gasping for breath, Cardigan saw the ramrod's face through a red haze of agony. "Ready to talk now?" Brock panted.

"You won't like what I'll say, bucko. You're all muscles and no guts. Tell your friends to turn me loose and I'll—"

Brock lunged in again, battering Cardigan with fully unleashed fury now, lips curling back in triumph as Cardigan's body sagged in the grip of the men who held him.

Cardigan knew that he couldn't last this way. Brock meant to kill him, whether he talked or not. That was what Tharp had meant in the message which told Brock to pen up the "wild horses." Or maybe that hadn't been Tharp's meaning. Maybe he'd wanted Brock to capture and hold the lawmen, and Brock was afraid they'd get away from him and was taking this way out. It didn't matter now.

Cardigan flung himself back, twisting and throwing all his remaining strength into the effort to free himself from the two who clung to him like leeches. One of the pair lost his grip. With his freed hand Cardigan struck at the man's weak-looking jaw. It was an awkward, backhanded blow and yet it sent the man staggering away.

BROCK'S red face showed sudden alarm. Swiftly drawing his gun, he struck down along Cardigan's temple and cheek with the weapon's heavy barrel.

The blow stunned Cardigan and sent him to his knees with a sick agony flooding through him, robbing him of the power of movement. Distantly he heard Brock's raw voice say, "You stubborn—"

The crash of a shot beat against Cardigan's ears then. He sensed the sudden, startled movements of those close around him. Then he heard a shout and the drumming sound made by the hoofs of a swiftly approaching horse.

His mind cleared. He saw that the two men who had held him were trying to get into the saddles of their frightened, rearing horses. Brock was swearing thickly at the two, while he crouched and tried to aim a shot past them toward the rider who was approaching.

The rider was Sam Ortega, with smoke from the shot he'd fired still wisping from the muzzle of his gun. Cardigan hurled himself against Brock just as the latter threw down his gun for a shot at Sam.

The shot went into the ground as the two men struggled for possession of the weapon. Brock fought convulsively, in a frenzy of fear, his eyes rolling to look from Cardigan to Sam. No guts, Cardigan thought.

Cardigan wrenched the gun from Brock's hands and tossed it aside. He didn't want it. His cold fury was filled with the memory of what Brock had done to him, and he wanted to repay in kind. He shoved the foreman away from him and then, with fists cocked and a narrow smile on his face, he stalked his man.

Brock fell back, but not fast enough. A long whipping blow jolted him. He made a flurry of resistance then, and Cardigan battered through, his fists pounding steadily as they drove Brock back, back. The ramrod tried to protect his face, shuddering breath gushing from his mouth as Cardigan hammered his belly. The big body stiffened and, with a groan, Brock twisted around and fell.

Sam Ortega reined up close by, a shiny new

gun uptilted in his hand, and grinned widely as he looked down. The two barflies were riding back toward town, whipping their mounts with the rein-ends. "They scare easy, that kind," Sam said.

Brock was crawling toward his own horse. Cardigan let him go in spite of Sam's growl of disapproval. "Hell with him," Cardigan said, as Brock pulled himself into his saddle and wheeled his horse away. Then he called, "From now on, Brock, stay away from Bent T!"

Brock gave him a smoldering, beaten look and rode after his companions.

Sam was building himself a cigarette. "Where to now, bucko?"

Cardigan nodded in the direction of the ranch.

"With Brock out of the way you'll have a free hand with the lady, is that it?" Sam asked. "You'll cut a hell of a figure, prancing around a grass widow with a face like you've got now."

Cardigan dabbed at his bleeding temple with a bandanna. "Damn you, Sam," he said without malice. "When we get to the ranch, hide that new gun of yours somewhere. Don't let her see that you've got it."

THEY found Ann Tharp in one of the canyons on the Bent T range. She was riding back and forth among the cattle with a tally book in her hand. She shoved the book hastily into the pocket of her riding skirt when Cardigan rode up and said, "Making a count, Mrs. Tharp?"

She didn't give him a direct answer. Her eyes scanned his face in sudden shadowed worry. "What happened to you? Where have you two been, and where's Ed?"

"He won't be back here for a spell."

Her chin lifted quickly. "So that's the way it is. You've had a fight with him, eh? Why, Cardigan?"

He shrugged. "Call it a difference of opinion. He hadn't been doing much good for this ranch anyway. Sam and I can work the stock for you if you want. I've noticed that you need to get some branding done."

She regarded him suspiciously. "How could poor old Ed get anything done, with the crew taken away every time he needed—" She checked herself and then said, "I thought you were in a hurry to get your stock cut out so that you could keep on the move."

"Sam and I aren't in that much of a hurry."

"Oh?" She looked around at the cattle. "Well, I'm sure I don't want you around here after what you've done to poor Ed. Is he badly hurt?"

"I don't reckon he is."

"I suppose you're lying about that."

Cardigan felt a stir of anger. "I don't have to lie about it."

She gave him a sidelong glance of appraisal. "No, I suppose you don't. You're very strong and sure of yourself. Well, you can't work cattle with your face bleeding like it is. Tell your partner to do what he can, and we'll ride to headquarters. I've got some disinfectant there."

Back at the house, Ann tore some cloth into strips and placed them in a pan of boiling water. Then she lifted them out with a stick, wrung the water from them, and returned to Cardigan's side to bandage his head.

"Thanks," he said when she had finished. "I'm surprised that you'd do that for me."

"I'd do it for a dog." She glanced down at his empty holster. "I'm surprised that you didn't take Ed's gun away from him while you were at it."

"I did take it, but I threw it away. I didn't want it."

"You're either a strange man or a fool."

Cardigan shrugged. Glancing through the doorway that led to the parlor, he saw a writing desk in one corner of that room, and wondered if Derek Tharp kept his records or money in one of its drawers. If that were the case, Ann must know about it. But when he looked up at her face, catching in her eyes an expression of warm concern for him which she swiftly withdrew, he decided that she didn't know. Unless she was a mighty good actress, Ann Tharp knew nothing of her husband's doings.

He got to his feet. "Aren't you afraid to have me alone with you?"

"No. I don't think I'm the kind that interests you."

"Don't be too sure about that," he warned, smiling.

She gave him a wary, sizing-up glance.

"Is that why you ran Ed off, to be alone with me? It won't do you a bit of good."

"Pretty much in love with your husband, is that it?"

For just an instant her glance wavered. Then she said, "You'd better go down to the bunkhouse and rest up the remainder of the day. You've had quite a beating, Cardigan. By tomorrow night I want all your stock cut out and driven away from here."

CARDIGAN spent a restless afternoon in the bunkhouse. He got up a dozen times to make sure that Ann's mare still was in the corral. She hadn't ridden back out to the canyons, but had remained in the house. Was it to keep Cardigan from searching the place in her absence?

He couldn't be sure about anything now. One minute he was certain that she was innocent, the next minute he had to fight off the chilling fear that she might not be. Whenever he tried to think something through, his mind swung to Ann and he remembered how lovely she was, and his thinking stopped there.

His head lifted in a crazy, silent laugh. He knew now what it was that ailed him. For the first time in his misspent life Lee Cardigan was fully in love with a woman. And she was the wife of the man he meant to trap for the rope. That being the case, he, Cardigan, had turned out to be something pretty low.

He was a hell of a specimen to be thinking, like he was, of taking Ann away from here and giving her a better life. It was crazy. But he was crazy in love with her, and admitted it to himself now.

Sam Ortega rode in just after sundown. "Half or more of the calves on this place have been rustled," he said. "They aren't following any cows."

"Maybe Tharp bought them."

Sam grinned mockingly in the bunkhouse gloom. "You aren't fool enough to swallow that. No, he started out to swing a wide loop and then found something that paid off better."

At supper, Ann Tharp looked even more beautiful than she had before. Her braided hair formed a coil on top of her poised head. She was wearing a simple dress that fitted her tightly at the waist and then flared out in a wide skirt.

When the men had finished eating and rose to leave, she touched Cardigan's arm. "I'd like to talk with you a minute, Cardigan."

Sam gave Cardigan a swift, knowing look and went on out. Ann had noticed that look. Her cheeks were rosy when she said, "We'll sit on the front porch. It's cooler out there."

As he followed her through the parlor, Cardigan glanced swiftly around the room and saw that it was sparsely furnished. There was the writing desk that he had seen before, some chairs, a sofa placed in front of the fireplace. The rug was worn thin. There was no sign of prosperity here.

They sat down in chairs on the front porch. The stars were beginning to come out now, above the opposite rim of the valley. Ann drew a deep breath and said, "It's peaceful here in the evening. I've always liked this valley. It's too bad the range is so poor."

She turned her head; Cardigan was aware that she was watching him now. But, busying himself with tobacco sack and brown paper, he gave no sign of awareness of her scrutiny.

"I've been thinking," she said after a time, "about your offer to work the stock for me. There's much that should be done, and if you really aren't in any hurry—"

"You women sure change your minds. Have you forgotten what you think I did to Ed Brock?"

"No, but I know Ed pretty well. He's a person who gets into sudden violent rages, and when I thought it over I decided that perhaps you weren't entirely to blame."

"Well, what is it you wanted done with the cattle?"

"Branding, for one thing."

TOUCHING a match to his cigarette, he looked at her. "Just branding?"

"No. There are some other things—" Her slim body stirred in her chair. "I've got to be frank with you, I guess. I think some mavericks must have drifted in. I want them driven away, all the ones that don't belong here. Is there some way you can tell?"

"Well, a calf will follow its mother for a long time."

She nodded eagerly. "That's it. I'd heard that, but I'd forgotten about it. You see, I know even less about the cattle business than my husband does. I'm from the East. Derek's people lived in a town near my home, and when he returned for a visit he— Well, we decided to marry."

Cardigan closed his eyes, bitterly visualizing the yellow-haired young hombre courting a pretty Eastern girl without letting her know that out here he was marked as a killer and a hardcase. Cardigan wondered how much of the truth about Tharp she had learned since that time. He said, "Awhile ago you weren't trusting Sam and me a bit. You haven't changed your mind just because Brock was a hothead."

"No. I really can't explain it, Mr. Cardigan. Perhaps it's just that I've come to know you better."

That sounded thin. Cardigan wondered what her real reason might be, whether she was planning to take up where Brock had left off. That was the hell of having a lawman's mind; you could trust no one and you were always looking for lies, always wary, never letting yourself believe that people could have simple and honest motives.

"Maybe," he said softly, "it's just that you didn't ever really trust Brock."

She gave him a swift and wordless look. Getting up, she walked back and forth on the porch with her hands sliding nervously up and down her arms.

Cardigan knew that she wasn't telling him all that was in her mind. She must know that those mavericks hadn't just drifted in. She must suspect that they were stolen stuff. She wanted them driven out in order to remove evidence that might be used against her husband. She was loyal to him, trying to shield him, while Tharp, like many a man who'd gotten sudden money, had looked right away for a flossy woman to go with it.

Throwing his cigarette away with sudden vigor, Cardigan stood up. "All right," he said. "Sam and I will work for you, Ann."

She gave him a look of gratitude. A silence gripped them both. It was as if they both knew that there was something further to be said between them, but neither could put it into words. Looking up at his face with wide, dark eyes, she swayed toward him.

He seized her and kissed her, roughly and with a sudden release of pent-up and tortured feeling. For an instant she responded, her mouth warm and eager, her body pressing against his with frank desire. His heart leaped. But then he felt her go cold and distant within his arms. She didn't struggle, only waited for him to release her.

His arms fell to his sides and he stepped back. She didn't strike him. She looked up at him in a reproachful silence that had more sting than any blow or words could carry.

He felt an imperative need to say something. "Ann, I—"

Her expression silenced him, and puzzled him too. After the first moment, she didn't seem angry with him any more. Her eyes held a deep wisdom, and her reproach seemed to turn inward. She said, "I can't blame you for being what you are. I knew I couldn't

[*Turn page*]

Nagging Backache Sleepless Nights...

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trust you. But I led you on. I wanted you to do that. And finding that I can't trust myself is something that I— Oh, I feel so cheap and ashamed!"

She was crying now, without sound. She whirled and darted blindly into the house, closing and locking the door behind her.

When Cardigan reached the bunkhouse he slammed himself down on his blankets. Sam Ortega roused up in the gloom, peering across the aisle. "She ran you out, eh?"

"No!" Cardigan said savagely.

Sam whistled. "Then you've fallen for her. That's bad for the job, bucko. You find out anything about Tharp yet?"

"Nothing."

"Better get to it. We haven't got a lot of time. He'll be heading back here as fast as he can travel."

ED BROCK hit them just past noon of the following day. There was no warning at all, just the sudden snarl of a rifle bullet that passed over Cardigan's head and clanged against the frame of the windmill nearby.

His reaction was immediate. He flung Ann Tharp roughly to the ground and dropped down beside her so that his body would shield her.

They had been making a tally of the mavericks that they had cut out of the stock in the other canyons. Sam Ortega was driving them in here. The dust kicked up by the little gather hung in the still air and had obscured the would-be killer's vision. He had fired anyway, even though his bullet might have struck Ann Tharp. Cardigan fought to control a swiftly-rising, insensate fury. His hand made a futile gesture to his empty holster as he lifted his head to peer up at the walls of the canyon.

A faint wisp of smoke betrayed the man's location. He was at the top of the south wall, forted up among some big rocks.

Cardigan scrambled up, pulling Ann with him, and darted to the shelter of the water trough, where they both dropped down again. He looked at her swiftly to assure himself that she was all right. She was biting her lip and there was a look of pain on her face; he had hurt her when he flung her to the ground. Yet, looking at him strangely now, she drew a heavy sixgun from the waistband of her skirt and handed it to him.

Cardigan had noticed that she had brought an extra weapon along today. He wondered if some womanly intuition, a foreboding of trouble that couldn't be handled by the pearl-stocked toy she carried in her pocket, had led her to do that. Looking down at the weapon, he saw that it was his own gun.

"Thanks," he said shortly. "Stay here and keep down."

The man on the hilltop had fired no second shot at the figures which had darted through the dust to the shelter of the trough. After his first miss he would be scared now, and would want to make the next shot count. And he hadn't had time to draw a bead.

Cardigan leaped up and plunged across the floor of the canyon at a run, reached the cover of some brush and stopped there, panting. He wondered where Sam was. Peering through the dust pall, he tried to locate Ortega, but saw no sign of him. The cattle were slowing, which was a sign that Sam had left off driving them and was doing something else.

Cardigan couldn't afford to rely on that, though. And he still was filled with a dark fury because of the way the marksman had risked shooting Ann Tharp. He wondered who was up there among the rocks and decided that it would be Brock, or perhaps someone hired by Brock to do the chore for him. After checking the loads in the cylinder of his gun, Cardigan deserted the brush and ran up the steep, rock-studded slope of the canyon wall at a long quartering angle.

The man above saw that Cardigan was coming after him. It seemed to throw him into a frenzy of fear, and his rifle crashed out shots in swift succession. Bullets screeched in ricochet from the rocks, wailed past Cardigan's body, kicked up geysers of dirt near his feet. Then suddenly the fusillade stopped. In its stead came the deeper sound of a six-gun shot, just one, followed closely by a man's hoarse and gurgling scream. Then there was silence, except for the echoes of gunfire which lingered in the canyon.

Frowning, Cardigan heard a voice reach down to him. It was Sam Ortega's voice and

it said casually, "You can take it easy now, Lee."

WHEN he reached the canyon rim Cardigan found Sam standing spread-legged, smiling broadly as he blew smoke from the barrel of his new sixgun. Ed Brock lay between two of the boulders, his body queerly twisted, the redness of his face already somewhat mottled by death.

"I spotted him on his way up," Sam said, "and got up here as fast as I could. Tried to come in behind him and get close enough to hit him over the head, but he heard me and turned around with that rifle in his hands, and so—" Sam made a negligently expressive shrug and added, "We'll never get anything out of that one now."

Cardigan nodded, wiping sweat from his face, and slowly holstered his gun. He had had his chance, when Brock waylaid him on the way out from town, to force the man to tell what he knew. He had passed that up. Perhaps even then he'd had his head full of woman, even though he hadn't been aware of it at the time.

For the first time in his career Lee Cardigan had let outside matters interfere with his work.

"Find something to cover him with, Sam," he said thickly, "and go fetch the sheriff out here. I'll take Mrs. Tharp back to headquarters."

She was standing by the water trough when Cardigan got back down to the bottom of the canyon. "It was Brock," he told her. "Sam killed him."

"Sam has a gun, then?"

"Yes," Cardigan admitted. "Sam likes guns. He bought a new one when we were in town yesterday."

"He kept it hidden from me."

"I guess he had it hidden under the skirt of his saddle."

"I see. You were very successful in fooling me so that you could gain my confidence, weren't you?" She turned and strode away toward her horse.

It was evening when Sheriff Vincent and Sam Ortega rode in to headquarters. While Sam went on to the corral, the sheriff rode up to the house, where Cardigan was sitting alone on the porch. Ann Tharp must have heard the sheriff's horse. She came out and stood waiting, ignoring Cardigan entirely.

Vincent looked at Ann and touched his hat respectfully, and then said, "Mr. Cardigan, we'll have to hold a coroner's hearing tomorrow around ten-thirty. Can you and your partner be there?"

"We'll be there."

The sheriff nodded and looked toward Ann once more. "I'm sorry about all this, Ann. But I'll have to ask you to be at the hearing too."

"I'll come, Mr. Vincent," she said.

After the sheriff had gone Cardigan sat on the porch for a long time, smoking and watching the shadows gather in the valley. Ann Tharp was busy in the kitchen now. Sam Ortega, having washed up at the bench by the bunkhouse door, was coming up the path. It was hell, Cardigan thought, that the innocent had to suffer along with the guilty, sometimes. And Lee Cardigan, the man-hunter, was one of those who smashed their lives for them.

The triangle clanged on the back porch, and Sam and Cardigan went into a meal which was eaten in hushed quiet.

The hearing, next day, was a brief and perfunctory affair. Cardigan told of the way Brock had waylaid him on the trail out from town, and of the fight they had had at that time. One of the barflies had been picked up by Sheriff Vincent, and he confirmed Cardigan's story. Then Sam Ortega told of killing Brock on the rim of the canyon on Bent T range.

That was about all there was to it. The town's doctor, a bald and portly little man who served as coroner, engaged Vincent in a long whispered talk. Presently the sheriff announced, "We find that Ed Brock died of a bullet wound inflicted by Samuel Ortega in self-defense. No further hearing will be needed in this case, and no charges will be filed." The sheriff glanced toward Cardigan and smiled. "That's all."

Ann Tharp, as she rose from her seat, gave Cardigan one long, frowning, measuring look. Then she went on outside.

She was silent during the ride home. But when they dismounted at the corral, she said,

"Come up to the house, Cardigan. I want to talk with you."

IN THE parlor she took off the hat that she had worn to town and placed it on the mantel over the fireplace. One of the poorly-laid flat stones in front of the hearth rocked under her foot, making the only sound that was in the room as she turned to face Cardigan. She put her question to him directly, openly. "You're some sort of an officer, aren't you?"

"What makes you ask that?" he said guardedly.

Her eyes were steady, watching him coolly. "Everything. The respectful way the sheriff spoke to you. The way he accepted your word of what happened, without even asking me to testify. The way you lied to me about you and Sam being broke, when Sam had enough money to buy a new gun for himself. You're after my husband, aren't you?"

"Should someone be after him, Mrs. Tharp?" he asked softly.

Her lips quivered. "I don't know. I shouldn't have said that at all, I suppose—you'll take it as an admission of guilt. But I'm at the end of my rope, so let's quit playing games with one another. You must be very proud of yourself, coming here as a drifting rustler and fooling me completely for awhile. The idea was that I'd think you were one of our own kind, wasn't it? You've been playing a part, Cardigan, but you don't carry yourself like a thief. You've been too confident, too sure of yourself, all the while you were putting on a sham. And you even tried to make love to me—was it because you thought that's what a thief would do if he got the chance?" Her mouth curled with bitter scorn. "Are all officers as low and sneaky as you, Cardigan?"

He said hoarsely, "Ann, a man does the job that—"

"What has Derek done?" she demanded, interrupting him. She was trembling now; her dark eyes were wide with a sort of nameless terror.

"I can't tell you that, Ann. My job is to take him in. A court will decide the rest. It might be that he's innocent, and in that case it wouldn't be fair to him for me to go around saying that he'd done this or that."

"Fair!" She flung the word at him, and it was like the lash of a whip. "You're not one who should talk of being fair. You've sneaked in here and got the sheriff on your side so I can't go to him to have you thrown off the place. You've gotten Ed Brock killed, so that now I haven't anyone to help me!"

"Ann, listen to me!" Cardigan gripped her arms to quell her violent trembling, and found the touch of her flesh shockingly cold. "You know how it was with Brock. It was him or us, and Sam did what he had to do. Ann, I want to help you if you'll let me."

She laughed. There was no humor in the sound, only bitterness and near-hysteria. "That's not part of the job you were sent to do, is it? Wouldn't you be double-crossing your bosses, whoever they are? Or do you always do that when a reasonably pretty woman—"

Cardigan did something, then, that he had never done before. He slapped a woman. He struck Ann Tharp's cheek lightly and yet with enough force so that the shock of it quieted her hysteria. "Now listen to me," he said roughly. "Your husband is in bad, and deep. You're a clever woman and not a fool. You must have sensed what was going on even though you didn't know for certain. You've got to get out of this before he comes back here, before it's too late for you to get out. I'll take you to town and you can get on a train."

"Turning my back on my husband?" Her trembling was stilled now; she looked at Cardigan steadily and with a fierce intentness. "Do you think everyone else lives by the same dirty code you do, Cardigan? I'm married to Derek Tharp, and I warn you I'll do anything I can to help him. I'll testify in court that I didn't say any of the things I've said here this afternoon."

Biting her lip, she paused, and then went on, "Oh, I know that he's been wild. That's why I insisted that we buy a ranch. I thought that hard work was what he needed, and that it might change him. But it was no good. I was too anxious to get settled somewhere and I talked him into buying this place because it was cheap. But it was too hard to make a living here. Derek got to be dis-

couraged and sullen. Any man would, fighting this dry, barren range."

"And it's too big a job for any woman," Cardigan said gently, "trying to reform a man."

"Hear me out," she retorted. "Derek beban making trips to look for a better ranch, but I knew we didn't have enough money to make even a down payment on one. And I knew he didn't need to take the whole crew along to advise him. Oh, I've known for a long time. That makes me an accomplice, doesn't it? That's the way I want it. Go ahead and arrest me, Cardigan!"

SHE was getting hysterical again. She had some crazy idea that by giving herself up she might somehow protect her husband. "Damn it," Cardigan blurted, "think straight! You don't love him. Why stick with him after what he's done to you?"

They faced each other in silence for a full minute. Then Ann said, "You think you can get me to be disloyal to him, because I admitted that I wanted you to make love to me. You'll use any club you can get, won't you? I've been ashamed of that ever since it happened. It gave me a look at a part of me that I hadn't known existed, a part that I don't like. Maybe I'm just a cheap woman after all."

"Ann, don't talk like that," Cardigan groaned.

"Don't touch me, Cardigan, ever again. You can take me to prison, but even a prisoner has some rights."

"I'm not going to arrest you, dammit! I said I wanted to help you!"

"There's no helping me. I've chosen my way of life and I'm sticking by it."

Cardigan scanned her face with a stricken glance and knew that he had lost out, that he could never beat down her loyalty to Derek Tharp. She didn't know about Mrs. Cassiter, and Cardigan wasn't going to tell her. She wouldn't believe him anyway.

He said thickly, "You want Sam and me to get off your place?"

"I don't care what you do. You know where I stand, Cardigan. And now, if you're through, you can get out of my house."

He turned to the door. But just as he stepped onto the porch her voice reached to him once more, saying, "Tell me one thing, please. Has Derek—is the charge against him—" Her voice broke.

He looked around at her. "It's bad, Ann," he blurted. "This time it's real bad." Then he put on his hat, stepped down off the porch and moved with long, driving strides toward the bunkhouse.

Sam Ortega was playing solitaire with a deck of greasy cards he'd found somewhere in here. He looked up in surprise when Cardigan said, "Roll your blankets, Sam. We're pulling out of here for awhile. We'll camp in one of those canyons and get our cattle sorted out from the rest."

"Did you find out where Tharp's got the money hidden?"

"No. She doesn't know anything about that."

Sam played a diamond queen and then looked up at Cardigan with sharpened interest. "You're gone on her. You've got it bad—it shows all over your face. Does she know we're law?"

Cardigan nodded mutely as he began rolling his own blankets. He had made another mistake today, by admitting to Ann that he was a lawman. It was the worst mistake a man in his position could make. Now she could warn her husband when he arrived, and the re ult would be that there'd be hell to pay. But being near to her, seeing her warm loveliness and the unhappy look in her eyes, had stirred Cardigan so deeply that he hadn't been able to think logically.

"This could be bad," Sam said, shaking his head.

"All right, so I made a mistake," Cardigan said savagely. "Brock sent word to Tharp about the same thing, anyhow. But if you want to pull out, Sam, I'll handle the rest of the job alone."

Sam grinned with malicious humor. "Who said anything about pulling out? Way you're all wound up over a woman, friend, you're going to need somebody like me around to look after you."

They camped in one of the canyons for four days, sorting their blotch-branded cattle out of the Bent T stuff and penning their animals in a hastily-erected brush corral at

the upper end of the canyon. It was hard, dusty, sweaty work, in these canyons where the heat built to oven-like intensity during the long afternoons. Cardigan threw himself into it with an abandon that left him dog-tired, so that every night after their scanty supper he fell asleep almost at once.

HE HAD thought that this might dull his crazy yearning for Ann Tharp, but it didn't. Every minute of every day her image was in his mind. At night, in dreams, he had vivid memories of the softness of her mouth and the way she had, for a moment, responded to his kiss.

As Sam had said, Cardigan had it bad. He mulled over a dozen wild ideas and discarded them one by one. Foremost was the notion of taking her out of here by force. That way she wouldn't be charged as an accomplice for standing by her husband. But it was no good. She was a wilful and determined woman, else she never would have stayed here, trying futilely to reform Derek Tharp. She was not a person who would be pushed into something against her will. Cardigan respected her for that, and knew that it was an indication of real character and worth. She was a woman in a million, the sort that a man would want by his side, giving him confidence to face all the future years. But she was somebody else's woman. And if he tried to take her out of here she would hate him for it.

She did not come near the canyons during those four days. He saw her only once, across the far reach of the valley, coming from the direction of Wind River and heading toward ranch headquarters. She had a half-filled gunnysack tied behind the cantle of her saddle, so he concluded that she had gone out for supplies.

On the evening of the fourth day, Sam Ortega was restless. Finally, peering across the supper fire, he spoke up. "We've got the cattle all gathered, hombre. What now?"

"We'll start them out tomorrow, back to where we borrowed them. They're no use to us any more—Tharp knows too much about us to be fooled. Think you can handle them alone once they're started?"

"And leave you alone here?"

"I'll make out. I'll be free to prowl around as I want, and maybe I can figure out a way to handle Tharp when he shows up. I've bungled this case from start to finish, Sam, and it's not fair for you to take the risks I've brought down on us."

Sam squinted at Cardigan and then snorted. "For a minute there I thought you were aiming to cross Turcoe up and run out with the woman. But I guess not. You're not that kind of timber. But you must have lost your savvy completely, that's all I can say. Tharp'll have tough hands with him, and they'll—" Sam broke off, lifting his round brown face as he listened to the sound of hoofbeats that now sounded through the still air. He dropped a hand to his gun. "Company coming," he warned. "More than one horse."

There were six of them. A tall, handsomely-dressed hombre with a broadcloth coat, a tan mustache, and tawny hair, rode in the lead. Derek Tharp, Cardigan thought, was quite a figure of a man. The five men behind Tharp were an assorted lot, one of them quite old and a couple of them surprisingly young, all being alike in having a wary, hard-bitten look about them.

Tharp reined his horse down and lifted a hand in greeting. "Evening, boys," he said in casual tones.

Cardigan rose to his feet. The game was beginning; he could play it along in the direction Tharp had started it. "Light down, all of you," he said after returning the greeting. "There's some coffee left."

Tharp spoke a low word to one of his companions and then stepped down from his saddle. The others didn't dismount. Two of them, the young-looking ones, circled past the fire and rode on up the canyon to peer into the brush corral.

THARP approached the fire with a lithe and easy stride. It wasn't hard to understand how he had impressed an Eastern girl who hadn't known about his way of life out here. He had a cleanly-chiseled face and a look of jaunty self-confidence. His manner seemed to say that he wanted to be friendly with everyone. On the surface, he was an hombre one could like without half trying.

But Cardigan had learned long ago that sometimes the clean-looking, friendly ones were the real hardcases, whereas men of disreputable appearance and dour disposition often were honest enough.

Cardigan saw that Tharp carried a gun in a holster that was almost concealed by his long coat. Warily Cardigan watched the man, and waited.

Tharp took his time. He waited until the two young men returned from the brush corral and one of them said, "Worked-over brands all right, boss."

Tharp nodded then, smiling so that his white, evenly-arrayed teeth gleamed in the firelight. "Never mind the coffee, friend," he said to Cardigan. "We've just had supper at headquarters. You've probably guessed that I'm Tharp. We got in about the middle of the afternoon, and Mrs. Tharp was telling me you'd had trouble with Brock."

"That we did."

Tharp shrugged a little. "He was always getting on edge about one thing or another. Your name's Cardigan, I understand. You and your friend working alone?"

Cardigan nodded. He still was on guard, though somewhat puzzled by Tharp's seemingly friendly attitude. That could be, he knew, just a pretext, a way of lulling the lawmen into a feeling of security. "This is Sam Ortega," he said. "We were driving some stock through and camped out in the valley. Being tired, neither of us wanted to ride nighthawk, and we didn't know there was other stock around. Our stuff got mixed with yours and we've just finished cutting it out. We figure to be on our way tomorrow."

Cardigan was testing Tharp now. He wanted to see just how far along the outlaw would carry his pretense of friendliness. But there was more to it than that. Sam and he were outnumbered, and this was no place to make an open fight if he could avoid it.

Tharp shrugged again. "No hurry about that, as far as I'm concerned. And there's no need for you boys to stay out here, living on beans as I see you're doing. Ride back to headquarters with us and put up in the bunkhouse. Mrs. Tharp's a good cook. You can rest up and fill your bellies before you start your drive."

Tharp was smiling and affable about it. How much has Ann told him? Cardigan wondered. He tried to believe that she might have withheld part of her knowledge from her husband, but quickly discarded that. Loyal to the hombre as she was, she must have warned Tharp that Cardigan was the law.

That being the case, Tharp was laying a trap. Once Cardigan and Ortega started out for headquarters, they could be surrounded by Tharp's riders and shot down. Here they would at least stand a chance in a gunfight. Tharp was playing a part, all right.

Well, Lee Cardigan could play a part too. Taking Tharp in was only part of his job. The big thing was to get hold of the evidence John Turcoe wanted, the money or deposit records which would convict Tharp. To obtain them Cardigan had to lay low and give Tharp a certain freedom of action, in the hope that Tharp would go to the records and Cardigan could follow him to their hiding place.

SMILING, Cardigan said, "Why, thanks, friend, for the invite. But like I said, Sam and I were figuring on pulling out first thing in the morning, and we can get an earlier start from here. We've lost a lot of time and we're anxious to put some miles behind us."

"Somebody might be following along the trail those blotch-branded cattle of yours made, is that it?" Tharp asked thinly.

"Could be. And you wouldn't want them to get to looking around here too much, either. You've got a lot of calves, friend, for the number of stocker cows you own. So let's not call the kettle black."

Tharp chuckled. With a show of negligent acceptance of the jibe he reined away, saying, "I think we understand each other, Cardigan. Good night. And see that you head out early tomorrow."

Straight-backed, Tharp jogged away down the canyon, with his five riders following him closely. Almost at once the group was swallowed up in the gathering dark. For a time the sound of their hoofbeats drifted back. Then it too was gone. Sam Ortega let out a pent-up breath.

Easy, Cardigan thought. Too easy. He's got something in mind for us, and it suits him to take his time about it.

Sam spat into the fire. "That many of them, they could have gunned us right here if he'd given them the nod. He's a cold fish, that one. But what's he waiting for?"

"He was feeling us out, Sam. And I'd say he's a little worried. He's big game and he knows that the law would go to a lot of trouble to nail him. He isn't sure that we're really alone out here, or whether the hills are full of law that hasn't showed itself yet. Why make a fight with us, and risk having fifty men swarm in on him?"

"Then why'd he come out here at all?"

"To look us over. And to fool us if he could, make us think he'd taken us for what we seem to be, a pair of drifting rustlers. He knows what the law wants—proof and evidence. He took a chance here in order to lull us into thinking we had things our way, that he wasn't going to do anything about us and that we could take our time. My guess is that he'll try to get away now. He doesn't give a damn about this ranch any more, and can afford to drop it."

"Maybe you're a mind reader but I'm not," Sam said. "If he's going to make a break for it we'd better stop him."

"He'll go straight to the money, wherever it is, and take it with him. We'll be right on his heels, Sam."

Sam had turned to pick up his saddle. Now he stopped, bent over, his eyes glinting in the firelight as he looked up toward the rim of the canyon without turning his head. Seeing that, Cardigan stopped speaking and looked upward too. For just an instant he made out the furtively-moving figure of a man up there, against the stars. Then the figure disappeared among some brush.

"Circled back," Sam breathed. "Might be more than one of them, too. They can bottle us up here as good as in that bunkhouse. Your guess about Tharp being scared there was more law around was no good, bucko."

"I'll still gamble on it, Sam. If it weren't right they'd have gunned us. That fellow up there was sent back by Tharp to make sure we stayed put while he makes his getaway, so we'll play it along. Act natural, as if we hadn't noticed him. Turn in and let the fire go out."

"This is crazy!" Sam objected. "Do we just lie here and let him shoot us? I've gotten to be fond of my hide and I don't see any sense in risking it."

"He'd have plugged us a minute ago if he'd intended to," Cardigan reminded. "He'll have a rifle with him—they all carried saddle guns. We can't buck him with sixes at this range, and if he sees us trying a getaway he'll likely cut loose in spite of Tharp's worry about there being more law around. Once the fire's gone, though, he won't be able to see us any more."

Sam gave Cardigan a look of grudging admiration, and lay down in his blankets.

THIS was a test of nerve. Cardigan watched the fire die down to embers, which slowly contracted and became one red eye that finally blinked and went out. The canyon was in full darkness now, except for the faint and illusive starlight which did not seem to penetrate down here. The moon would not be up for another hour.

Sam's whisper said, "Damn if you weren't right, you cold-blooded devil. Let's move on out, eh?"

"Any time you're ready, Sam."

They moved without sound, picking up their saddles and gliding into the deeper darkness under the clump of trees where they had left the horses. When Cardigan swung onto his mount he said in a low voice, "They'll hear the horses anyway, Sam, so we might as well break out fast."

They swung into the open, bent low in their saddles, and put their mounts to a sudden full run. The clatter of hoofs against rocks seemed to fill the canyon. A sleepy voice made a shout of alarm somewhere above. Rifle fire crashed down at them, first from one rim of the canyon and then from the other rim as well. But they were moving, half-seen targets, and a bend of the canyon soon put them out of range.

"Blackie!" a voice shouted hoarsely, far behind them now. "They're busting out! Don't let 'em get past you!"

Cardigan drew his gun and thumbed back its hammer to full cock. As Sam and he

swept around the final bend of the lower canyon, he saw the dark figures of three horses which stood fanwise around a sapling to which they had been tied. Spooked by the gunfire and now by the sudden movement nearer at hand, the horses were rearing and snorting.

The faint glint of starlight on a moving rifle barrel caught Cardigan's eye. A man was flinging himself down behind a rock. He was too slow. Cardigan fired, timing the shot so that his horse was in mid-stride and thus was fairly steady at the moment. The man on the ground screamed and came erect, the rifle spilling from his hands. He was twisting around on crumpling legs as Cardigan swept past him.

Hearing the sudden heavy pound of Sam Ortega's gun behind him, Cardigan whipped a glance around. Sam was firing at two shadowy figures who crouched at one side of the canyon. They too had been slow. Cardigan made out a jumble of blankets at their feet and judged that they had been asleep, confident that the two who had gone up to the head of the canyon would be able to keep both Cardigan and Ortega pinned down.

Sam's fire, though not too accurate because it came from the top of a running horse, drove the two back. They got off a few shots that went wild, and then they plunged into the shelter of a small depression in the ground.

Then Cardigan and Ortega were past them, horses running free across the floor of the valley itself. Cardigan jacked the empties out of the cylinder of his gun and reloaded automatically. Five men, he thought—Tharp had left his entire crew behind to insure that the lawmen would not follow him, and it hadn't worked.

Lights were burning in the Bent T ranch house when Cardigan approached it. He was alone, having drawn somewhat ahead of Sam during the run along the valley floor. The moon was rising. In its pale light he scanned the place for Tharp's horse, but did not see the animal about. Reining up near the porch he stepped from the saddle and, drawing his gun, mounted the steps warily and eased through the open doorway of the parlor.

ANN THARP lay crumpled in one corner of the room. Her breathing made the only sound that existed here. It was a broken sound, a faint sobbing that shook her body. Hearing the tinkle of Cardigan's spurs now, she stiffened, lifted her head, and looked at him with eyes that held a stunned despair.

Thinking that she was badly hurt—she had a livid bruise on her temple—Cardigan darted to her and lifted her to her feet. "He's gone," she said dully. "That's all you're interested in, isn't it? She glanced toward the fireplace, where one of the flat stones now was tilted askew, partly revealing a cavity beneath it.

"He was in a rage when he got back here. He was obsessed with the idea that there must be more than just two of you, and he accused me of selling him out to you because I hadn't warned him that you were an officer. He'd found it out anyway, somehow. He hit me, and then he took a little metal box from under that stone. I hadn't known it was there. All of those stones are loose, but it never occurred to me to look under them." She swayed and would have fallen if Cardigan hadn't caught her. He placed her in a chair and then stepped to the door.

"Sam!" he called. "Sam, get in here." Then, gently, he said, "You didn't tell him I was the law. Why not, Ann?"

"Don't ask me that—I don't know. Go on, Cardigan, get about the rest of your dirty business. Haven't you done enough to my life? Get out and leave me alone."

There was no accounting for women, Cardigan thought. Ann Tharp might have been trying to protect him by failing to tell her husband what she had found out about him, yet she wanted him out of her life.

He said, "All right, Ann. I'll not bother you any more, ever."

He started out through the doorway, but her voice stopped him again. "Tell me one thing, Cardigan. There's reward money for you in this, isn't there?"

"Yes, there's a reward all right."

She stiffened in her chair as if to spring at him, her hair falling over one cheek in disarray, her eyes hating him. "I've lived

in the West long enough, Cardigan, to know that there's a name for you. Bounty hunter!"

It was the first time anyone had called him that, openly and to his face. Bounty hunter. . . . Maybe she was right. Maybe he had stepped across that thin line without realizing it.

He met Sam Ortega on the porch. "Watch over her, Sam. Tharp's lit out and I'm going after him. I think I know where to find him. Watch out for those gunhands of his. They might come here."

Sam looked at Cardigan oddly in the moonlight, but asked no questions. Cardigan stepped off the porch, swung into his saddle and headed for Wind River.

Tharp would go there first, he knew. Tharp would want to take Mrs. Cassiter with him when he left, or at least would want to arrange for her to meet him at once at some place like Denver.

In law work you always made it a point to get a line on a man's women so you'd know where his allegiance lay and could figure which way he'd jump when the cards were down. It was simple and always effective.

This was going to be Lee Cardigan's last case. And it was the one which had cost him the woman he loved, finally and forever.

HE LOCATED Mrs. Cassiter's place by the neat sign, MUSIC LESSONS, that was attached to the picket fence in front of the house. Though it was far past midnight now, a light burned in one of the rooms. Cardigan tried the front door and found it locked, then circled around through moonlight flower beds to the window of the room in which the light burned.

The window was open. He swung a leg over the sill and dropped into the room.

It was a bedroom. A blonde young woman, hastily packing a pair of grips that rested on the bed, whirled at the sound of his boots on the floor. He flung her roughly aside when she tried to keep him from reaching the grips. Plunging a hand into first one and then the other of them he found, at the bottom of the second one, the small metal box that he sought.

He took the box out and placed it on the floor. The woman watched him. She wore a robe over her nightgown, and she was pretty in a flashy, sensuous way. He drew his six gun and shot the tiny padlock off the box. The woman's eyes widened, but she made no sound as he knelt, still watching her, and riffled through the box's contents. She seemed to be waiting for something.

The box contained some money, but not much of it. But Cardigan lifted a sheaf of deposit slips and glanced at them in the lamplight. They were from a dozen banks scattered up and down the West, and they were made out to as many different names, the names Derek Tharp had chosen to cover up his deposits of his winnings. John Turcoe had been right. These slips represented a lot of money. If Tharp were successful in leaving here tonight he could live high for a long time.

Cardigan's ears detected a halt in the woman's breathing. She had heard something. It was the sound of running boots in the alley outside. Her greenish eyes flashed triumph as she glanced at Cardigan.

He spilled the box's contents back into it and tucked it under his left arm. Then he darted from the room, found the back door of the house and stepped slowly out onto the back porch.

Two saddled horses, with their reins trailing on the ground, stood in the alley. Tharp had been bringing fresh mounts, but where was Tharp now? Warned by the shot in the house, he must have taken cover somewhere.

A furtive stir of movement, behind some barrels at the rear of a saloon a short distance down the alley, warned Cardigan then. He stepped back just as a shot blasted, and heard the bullet pass him and whine on down the alley. The horses bolted. Cardigan stepped out again, swiftly, darted forward through the heavy shadows along the backs of the buildings, and stepped into the space between two of the structures.

"Tharp," he called, "I've got your money box here. Coming after it?"

That put it up to Tharp. John Turcoe had always said that a man was a fool to expose himself in going after someone who was forted up. Fort up yourself and make

him come after you. Because of advice like that Lee Cardigan had lived a long time in a dangerous business. And it had brought him, he thought bitterly now, pretty much of nothing.

There was a silence in the alley. Then the faint scuffing sound of a boot moving among some trash reached Cardigan's ears. He moved back a little in the darkness, his gun lifted in his hand.

Tharp's figure glided into view at the opening. He thought he couldn't be seen, standing in the shadows as he was. But the moonlight was striking the other side of the alley beyond him, and he was outlined against that. Tharp couldn't resist coming after the money box. Now was the time.

A voice somewhere down the alley called, "Tharp! Hold on there! What are you—"

Tharp whirled to face the speaker, and fired immediately. The muzzle flame from his gun seemed to splay out along the ground at his feet. Another gun had spoken first, and Tharp's body had jerked violently, so that he was bent nearly double when he pressed his trigger.

Cardigan heard Mrs. Cassiter's scream come from the back porch of her house as Tharp swayed and then fell face down in the alley dust. Tharp twitched once and then didn't move any more.

CARDIGAN stepped out of his hiding place and saw that Sheriff Vincent was coming up on the run, holstering his gun as he did so. "I figured he'd be getting back pretty soon," the sheriff said, "so I've been watching the woman's place. I reckon you got your man, Cardigan."

"You got him for me," Cardigan said. He handed Vincent the box. "Take care of this, will you? John Turcoe will be wanting it when he gets here. If you'll tell me where that telegrapher lives I'll get off a wire tonight."

Cardigan looked around, a feeling of heavy futility washing through him. Lights were coming on all over the town now. Doors and windows were being opened and sleepy voices were calling inquiries. People were interested in strange happenings here, just as they were everywhere. But they never would know the inside of it, the damage that was done to the lives of those involved.

"Five of Tharp's gunhands are out on the Bent T," Cardigan told the sheriff. "Maybe you ought to get up a posse and go after them. Mrs. Tharp and Sam are at ranch headquarters. She's clear in this case. Remember that, Vincent, and tell Turcoe. But you'd better bring her into town for safekeeping."

Vincent and his posse returned to Wind River next morning, bringing with them the body of a man. "There were only four of them left," the sheriff reported. "You'd killed this one. The rest of 'em got away from us, and from the way they traveled they're a long distance from here now. Mrs. Tharp didn't want to come into town, said she couldn't face people here. She didn't want to see you again ever. She promised to stay right at the ranch until the authorities get through questioning her. She's all broken up, but I left Ortega there just to make sure she stays."

"No need for that precaution," Cardigan said. "But thanks for your help, sheriff. Turcoe is coming here with some railroad attorneys and some Pinkerton men. They'll handle everything from here on. I'm leaving this morning."

The sheriff looked at him shrewdly. "Law work can be hell on a man. Your job is to protect people, the honest ones, but those same people are always ready to find some excuse to hate you."

"It cost me plenty," Cardigan said. "It cost me the only woman I ever wanted for my own."

PINE VALLEY, Arizona, held a rich and grassy range which had been overlooked, somehow, by the early settlers. Lee Cardigan had spotted it long ago, on one of his trips through the Mogollon country. He had wasted a full day here, that time, fascinated by the dream picture that had leaped into his mind, seeing the house that he would one day build on the knoll beside the creek, the fat cattle that would graze here.

The dream was reality now. He rode toward the stout log-and-stone house one evening, and paused on a ridge to look down

with a certain pride upon his Rafter C Cross layout.

He had built that house with his own hands, and the corrals too. The cattle that were drifting down for salt and water were in his own brand.

All that had been a year in the building, and the labor of it had hardened and toughened Lee Cardigan. For the first time that he could remember he was at peace with himself. He had solid values here. Even John Turcoe had admitted that when he had visited Cardigan a few months back. And Turcoe hadn't tried to get him to take another case.

There was no smoke curling from the chimney, though. There'd be no warm apple pie in the kitchen, no woman waiting at the door for his kiss. There never would be. He lifted his reins and rode on.

He was unsaddling at the horse corral when one of the kids who lived in the nearby town of Payson rode in, bare feet thrust into the stirrups of a livery stable nag. This, probably, was the first time in his life that the kid had had a horse at his command for a long ride; he was proud as all get-out, grinning broadly in spite of a missing front tooth.

"Why, hello there, Billy," Cardigan said. "That's a fine mount you've got."

The kid patted the horse fondly. "Aw, I just rented him. That is, the lady got him for me, at the livery. Some day I'm gonna have a horse of my real own, though. A big black—"

"The lady?"

The boy bobbed his head. "Uh-huh. She's real purty. Said I was to tell you she'd be at the hotel till stage time tomorrow. Aw, shucks, I forgot what she said her name was. She's gonna be real mad at me on account of she said I was to be special sure to tell you her name, because she suspected you knew a lot of other girls."

A tingling tightness clamped Cardigan's jaw together.

"Was it Ann? Ann Tharp?"

"Why, yeah! How'd you know?" Grinning once more, the kid caught the silver dollar that Cardigan spun into the air.

Ann Tharp was eating supper in the hotel dining room when Cardigan found her. She wore a neat traveling suit and her hair was done in a swirl about the top of her head. She rose, smiling, and extended her small firm hand to him. "Sit down, Lee. You're looking well.

For the first time in years he was painfully embarrassed in the presence of a woman. "Ann, you're—more beautiful than ever. But I heard that you'd gone back East."

"Yes. I stayed with my folks for a long while, until I got things sorted out in my mind."

"Can that possibly mean that you've forgiven me?"

She looked at him steadily. "There was nothing to forgive. You were doing your duty, that's all. I was upset and not thinking straight, and it's for you to forgive if you can the things I said to you. Time changes the look of things for all of us, I've found."

"But now— Ann, where are you going?"

"On to the coast, I suppose. I'll find a job out there. Perhaps I'll marry again." Her glance dropped to her plate.

He caught both of her hands in his. "Ann, Ann—"

Her eyes were smiling and eager when they lifted to his. "Does that mean you still—" At his vigorous nod she flushed, and then she went on, "I learned a number of things in Wind River after you left. Some of them—about Mrs. Cassiter—upset me terribly at the time. But the sheriff and his wife told me something that you had said before you left.

"And I saw John Turcoe last week, in Santa Fe. He told me that you had refused your share of the reward money, telling him to use part of it to double Sam Ortega's pay and then give the rest of it to the family of that brakeman who was killed. Oh, I'm brazen, I guess. I've tracked you down, Lee Cardigan. But I had a little pride left. You had to come to me, and now you have."

There was a clatter of dishes in the kitchen, then. But it was unheard by the man and the woman who faced each other across the table with the promise of the future bright before them.

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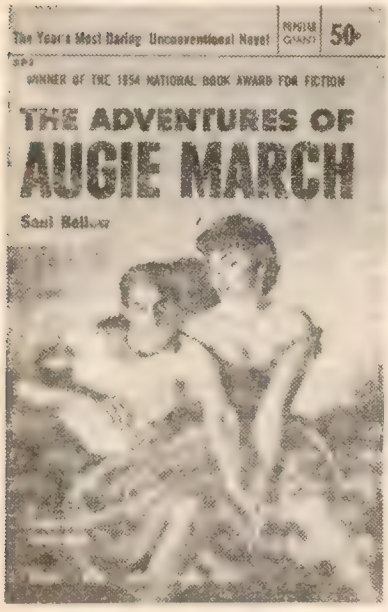

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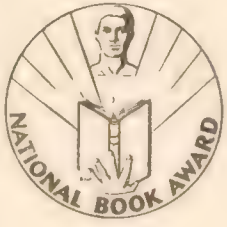

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Flight to Dawson

By BEN FRANK

KILLING DIDN'T come easy to Eddie Quinn . . . but neither did running away when the girl he loved needed him. . . .

ANY way you figured it, at twenty-one Eddie Quinn was licked; even if the dream wasn't quite dead, he'd given up. Shoving back from the rickety dining table, he stared hopelessly about his one-room shack. Everything in the room, not counting an old Winchester and a dozen shelves of books, wasn't worth more than ten dollars.

Grabbing up his worn sheepskin coat, he went outside, propped his long, bony back against the door frame, and stared about at the dismal landscape, brown and bare with a gray, drippy, wintery sky overhead. He guessed maybe his few acres of land weren't worth much more than the contents of the cabin, now that Gus Wolker was running the big Triangle and putting on the squeeze.

Gus hadn't made any bones about it. "No room for nesters around here," he'd said.

Turning his eyes to the northwest, Eddie saw a trickle of smoke lifting above a distant rocky ridge.

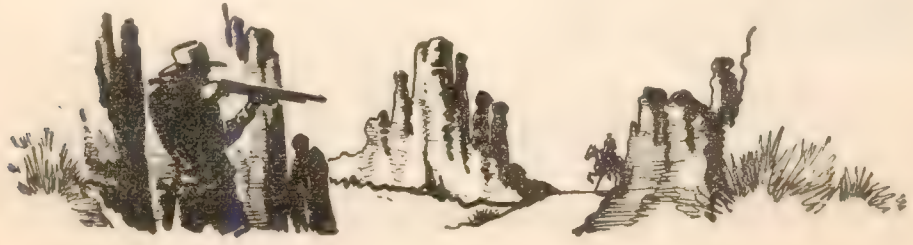
"Who in heck's built a fire over there?" he muttered.

Wanting to know for sure, he booted it out to the lean-to barn, saddled his roan, and rode toward the ridge. He was a long-legged kid with shaggy brown hair, unhappy brown eyes and a discouraged slump to his shoulders.

Ten years he'd lived in this rugged mountain country. Nine of them were pretty good years; the tenth was hell on wheels.

John Quinn, Eddie's father, had been a schoolteacher back in Ohio who had come out to the Rockies to regain his health. He had succeeded, only to be thrown from a bronc and fatally injured. Almost a year ago he had died, and shortly after that old Tom Wolker, owner of the Triangle, had had a heart attack. That was when Gus Wolker, the old man's nephew, had ridden into the valley to take over.

Yep, this tenth year had been bad, and Eddie was ready to call it quits. He wasn't a scrapper. All his bringing up had been against



The trip to Dawson would not be easy if it began to snow

violence, for his father had been a kind and gentle man. If it hadn't been for a certain girl, Eddie would have pulled stakes in the spring when his fences and crops had been destroyed by a hungry herd of Triangle cattle. But this girl—

She was old Tom Wolker's adopted granddaughter. Her name was Helen, and she had hair as black as tarpaper and eyes that were a deep-lake blue. She was eighteen, and as clean as new leaves after a rain. But since he had nothing to offer her but himself, which wasn't enough in his own estimation, she was as much out of his reach as the moon.

COMING to the rocky ridge, he rode cautiously, keeping behind a giant outcropping of red boulders. At last he left his horse and climbed up the rest of the way on foot. Ahead were miles of foothills and the mountains topped with snow. Below lay winding Bear Creek, which divided his land from the Triangle.

A dull anger ran through him. On his side of the creek he saw three men. They had rounded up two calves and were heating a branding iron in a brush fire. Eddie recognized them immediately. Gus Wolker squatted against a boulder. Spike Vargra, the rake-handle thin little gunman Gus had hired to ramrod the Triangle, was fanning the fire with his hat. Red Anderson, the second of Gus's men, sat in his saddle, herding the calves. Eddie had an idea those calves belonged to him.

For a minute he had a notion to ride down there and order the men off his land. But he wasn't a fighter. Anyway, what was the use? You couldn't win against an outfit like the Triangle, with Gus Wolker running it.

A cold, helpless feeling making him look old and tired, Eddie crawled back to his horse and headed for home. Twenty minutes later he rode around his lean-to barn and saw the Triangle pony tied to the pine post in front of his shack. That was when his heart began to bang against his ribs. The pony belonged to Helen Wolker.

Leaping to the ground, he ran to the door and opened it. And there she was, standing by the stove, small, slender, lovely. She lifted her head and faced him, and he felt a sudden shock. She was as pale as death.

"Helen," he began, "what—"

"Eddie," she broke in, her voice husky, "I'd almost given you up. Grandfather wants to talk to you. Will you go see him right away?"

Eddie stumbled over to her. She looked pitifully tired and frightened. He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her to stop worrying, that he'd look after her. He didn't touch her.

"No one's at home except grandfather and José," she hurried on, referring to the Mexican handyman. José was one faithful Triangle hand whom Gus had allowed to stay, perhaps because he knew he had little to fear from the old man. Helen was saying, "But Gus or one of the others may be there by the time you arrive, so you ride on alone. I don't think we should be seen together."

He started to ask her what it was all about, but she shook her head and said, "Please hurry, Eddie."

After that he stayed only long enough to warn her that Gus and his men were on the far side of the ridge, so if she didn't want to meet them she'd better circle eastward through the timber to get home. He hurried out, stepped into the saddle, and rode into the timber himself. He guessed maybe it would be just as well if he didn't meet the Triangle outfit.

The old, unpainted Triangle ranch house looked dismal and deserted, even though a trickle of wood smoke was curling from a stone chimney. Eddie pulled up and surveyed the scene.

There was no smoke from the bunkhouse. A half-dozen saddle ponies were running loose in a pole corral, their tails to the wet wind. Knowing that Gus and his men hadn't returned, Eddie spurred the roan downslope to the wide brown yard.

OLD José, wrinkled and bent, opened the door before Eddie reached the front porch. He looked frightened. Without a word he beckoned Eddie to follow him into old Tom Wolker's room. Once Eddie was inside José hurried out, closing the door softly. Eddie's eyes whipped about the gray dimness of the room.

He saw a big oak desk, some worn leather chairs, an unlighted brass lamp. A smell of sickness hung in the room. The old man lay on a big four-poster, thin, eyes too large for his face, his ragged whiskers and uncut hair as white as snow. Eddie hadn't seen Tom for a month. He was shocked by how the old man had failed during that short time.

"Come closer, son," the old man said, Eddie, his big hat in his hands, stepped over to the bed.

"Eddie," Tom Wolker said, "your pa and I were friends. After he was hurt I helped him some, you recall. Maybe you'd like to return the favor?"

The old man was near death, there could be no doubt of that. Eddie swallowed hard. He'd always liked Tom Wolker. "I'll do what I can," he said.

"It's about Helen." Seeing the way Eddie stiffened, the old man smiled. "You'd cut off your right arm for the girl, wouldn't you?"

A spasm of pain made the old man close his eyes and suck in a quick breath. When he opened his eyes again, he had lost his smile.

"I've put off doing something too long, Eddie. Listen, boy, listen close."

Some of the story Eddie already knew—about Helen's being adopted by the old man's son and daughter-in-law, and about the accidental death of these foster-parents when the girl was still a baby. But the part about her adoption papers never having been legalized in court was new to him.

"Always meant to have it done," the old man wheezed. "Just kept putting it off and now it's too late for me."

"I see," Eddie said slowly. "You mean Helen can't prove in court that she has been legally adopted."

"You catch on fast, boy. The papers are in the desk. First thing Gus'll do when I die is destroy them. Then the Triangle, everything, will be his." The old man stopped to catch his breath. "Top drawer, left-hand side, brown envelope. Take those papers to Ralph Boyle in Dawson, Eddie. He's a good lawyer. He'll fix things up for Helen."

Eddie found the brown envelope and carried it back to the old man's bed.

Tom Wolker clutched Eddie's arm. His thin, trembling hand felt cold and clammy.

"I want Helen to go with you, boy. Anything could happen to her after I'm gone. She'll have to slip away at night, Eddie. There's no one I can trust any more except you and José."

Exhausted, the old man let his hand fall back on the bed.

"Wait at Indian Butte for her, Eddie, at midnight." His voice was a faint whisper. "If she doesn't meet you by then, go on. Bring the sheriff."

A clatter of horses stopped him.

"Who's that, boy?"

Eddie stepped to a window. Gus Wolker and Spike Vargra had ridden into the yard and were dismounting near Eddie's roan.

"Better go," the old man whispered. "If Gus asks what you're doin' here, tell him you came over to raise hell about Triangle cattle getting on your land. He'd kill you for those papers, Eddie!"

EDDIE hurried from the room. Old José stood in the hallway. There was a look of sickish fear in his eyes.

"God be with you," he whispered hoarsely.

Heart hammering, Eddie followed the long, dim hall to the door and stepped out into the cold drizzle. At that moment Helen came riding around the corner of the low barn. Pretending not to see the girl, Eddie strode straight toward his horse and the two men.

"What are you doing here?" Gus asked flatly.

Eddie returned his stare evenly. "What do you think? Telling that old buzzard in there to keep his cows off my place!"

"Why don't you tell me?" Gus grinned crookedly. "I'm bossing the Triangle now."

"All right," Eddie gritted, "I'll tell you. Keep the Triangle stock out of my fields."

Gus laughed. "That reminds me—you're trespassing on Triangle property. Just for that I'm going to lick the hell out of you. Or if you want to make a gun fight of it—"

Eddie knew he couldn't stand up to Gus in a fist fight, and he couldn't outshoot him. He saw Gus hitch up his gunbelt and rock forward on the balls of his feet. The man was big. He was tough. He knew how to break a man with his big hands.

Eddie's eyes whipped about. Spike Vargra stood by the hitchrail, a long-fingered hand resting on the black butt of his sixgun. He was maybe thirty-five, but still as quick as greased lightning. It was two against one any way Eddie looked at it, and he felt a trickle of sickness begin to twist around deep down inside.

"Just a moment, Gus!"

Helen Wolker had ridden her pony between Gus and Eddie. She looked down at Eddie, a great anger in her blue eyes.

"Didn't you know my grandfather is sick?"

Startled, Eddie stared up at her blankly. She had a lariat in her hands. Her face was pale and twisted with hate.

"You knew," she said, "and yet you went in there and bothered him, a dying old man."

She had made a whip of the rope ends. She swung it viciously, and the rope burned across Eddie's face.

"Get out," she cried furiously.

The rope lashed out again, cutting across Eddie's upflung arms.

"Get out," she shouted, "and never come back!"

Trying to dodge the lashing rope, Eddie stumbled to his knees. He heard Gus and Vargra roar with laughter as the rope bit into his flesh.

Shielding his face, he stumbled to his feet. He ran toward his horse, the rope reaching for him, finding his back and shoulders. Someway he managed to get into the saddle. Spurring the roan, he rode for the distant slope. Helen tagged him, clouting him with the rope ends.

Suddenly the blows stopped and Helen whispered, "I'm sorry, Eddie, but they might have killed you." Then she was racing back to the ranch house.

HE DIDN'T look back until he'd reached the top of the ridge. Then, turning, he saw that Gus and Vargras were still standing by the hitchrail, laughing. Helen had dismounted and was running toward the house. Old José stood in the doorway, a bent, despairing figure.

Eddie rode on. The girl had played her part well to save his life, and he was so proud of her that he felt a lump squeeze up into his throat. But a moment later he was afraid for her. She hadn't given Gus and Vargra a chance to think. Maybe, when they stopped laughing and started thinking, they would realize they'd been tricked. What their next move would be he couldn't even guess.

And then he rode up out of a gully and met Red Anderson. Red wasn't much more than a kid, but he was as hard as nails, big, brutal. He grinned and spat between a gap in his front teeth.

"You still around, Quinn?" he said. "Thought maybe you'd pulled stakes. Understand you've got a wide yellow streak down the middle of your back."

Grinning, he waited for Eddie's next move. Eddie rode on. He couldn't risk trouble, not with that brown envelope in his pocket.

Riding into the pine timber, he heaved a sigh of relief. It was nice to have those trees between him and Anderson. A few minutes later, coming out of the timber, he first smelled the smoke. Then he saw it, part of the gray haze of the late murky afternoon.

After that he rode fast. He topped a last ridge and there it was, his shack, a smouldering ruin. He rode on until he felt the heat from the sizzling embers. It made him sick and angry. Family pictures, his father's books, bedding, clothing, the Winchester—all were gone, forever.

He had a hunch that someone had set the fire. He slid to the ground and circled, looking for some sign. He found a bootheel track that wasn't his own, and thought of meeting Red Anderson. Red was the kind who would burn a man out if his boss told him to. And Gus Wolker was the kind of a boss who would tell him.

Face grim, a feeling of oldness in his heart, Eddie climbed back into the saddle and rode away without a backward glance. Somehow he believed he would never come back here, that this was the end.

It lacked an hour of being dark when he rode into the pines and followed a rocky gully toward Bear Creek. It had begun to drizzle again, and the sighing wind through the trees was colder. It gave him a squeamish feeling. Up along the mountain trail to Dawson, he knew, it was probably beginning to snow.

By the time he left the creek and headed west, night had swooped down, and there wasn't a star in sight. It was a two-hours' ride to Indian Butte, which was nothing more than a jumble of granite that rose a hundred feet into the air. Eddie found a place sheltered by an overhang, slid to the ground, and hunkered down out of the wind. The old rancher had said to wait until midnight. Eddie figured he had about three hours to wait.

He got cold—first his feet, then his hands. He stood a dozen different times, swung his arms and stamped his feet. Once he stepped out into the open.

It had stopped raining, but there were still no stars. Later he felt something brush his cheek—snow.

EDDIE knew he was in for trouble then. Once through Rustlers' Canyon, he'd have to climb up to Eagle Pass over a mountain switchback trail. Sometimes, he knew, snow drifted twenty feet deep on parts of that trail. For the first time, he hoped that Helen wouldn't come. The trip to Dawson in a blizzard would be hard for a slip of a girl.

Eddie moved back into the shelter of the rocks and risked a match to look at the big silver watch his father had left him. It was eleven-five. Then he heard someone coming, riding fast. There was no sense in Helen's riding like that. But maybe it wasn't Helen. He lifted the sixgun from the holster and stepped out into the open.

Rider and horse loomed up suddenly, a moving black blur. Eddie had to take a chance. "Helen," he called, and the black blur swung toward him.

It was Helen, all right. "Eddie!" She said his name in a great burst of gladness. She swung down beside him, and her pony snorted and puffed and pawed the ground.

"Someone's following me," she said, and now her voice sounded frightened. Then she began to sob softly. "Grandfather died—not long after you left. That's why I decided to go to Dawson with you."

"I'm sorry about your grandfather," Eddie said.

And then he had her in his arms. Holding her close like this was the way it should always be, he thought. Only he remembered he didn't have anything to offer her.

"Who's following you?" he asked, moving away from her.

"I'm not sure. Gus and Spike were going through the papers in grandfather's desk when José helped me sneak away. That leaves Red Anderson."

"We'll find out," Eddie said grimly. "You ride on to the canyon. Wait for me where the trail cuts down through that narrow gully."

She didn't argue with him. "Be careful, Eddie," she said in a frightened voice, and swung into the saddle.

Eddie watched her vanish into the night. A moment later the rising wind had swept away the sounds of the pony's iron-shod feet.

He stared eastward, listening intently. Helen's pursuer wouldn't expect to run into trouble. A blast from his sixgun, Eddie figured, ought to send the rider back along the way he had come. Then Eddie believed that he and the girl could make it to Dawson without any further trouble. They had two good horses and a head start.

He heard the clopping of the horse's feet before he saw the animal and rider. The man was taking his time. Either he figured the girl didn't know she was being trailed, or that she'd be easier to take in daylight than in darkness.

The rider came out of the darkness to Eddie's left, angling toward the butte. Eddie lifted his gun and aimed high. He wasn't the kind to shoot a man if he could help it. He fired.

The horse whirled and crowded in close to the butte. Eddie sent another blast over the

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ARID-ZONA

By LIMERICK LUKE

A cowpoke in dry Arizona,
Became a big cattle ranch owner.
After waiting in vain
For five years for rain,
The poor feller still thinks it's gonna!

---

man's head. He heard a curse and recognized Red Anderson's voice.

FLASHES of fire leaped out of the blackness, and Eddie suddenly wanted to run. Another blast, and Eddie's roan squealed and went pounding away. But that didn't worry him much. The roan was well trained. He wouldn't go far.

He fired once again and heard Anderson riding back along the trail. Eddie relaxed and holstered his gun. Suddenly he was grinning. He had won his first fight. He felt fine —until he remembered it was snowing and that Anderson would likely ride to the Triangle for Gus and Spike Vargras. Face grim, he began to stumble along the trail toward the canyon, stopping now and then to whistle for the roan.

He'd gone may be half a mile when he found his horse. The animal came limping up out of the darkness, and it didn't take Eddie two minutes to discover what had happened. The roan had been nipped by a piece of flying granite, and in his frightened, plunging run had twisted a right front leg. Eddie suddenly felt old and tired and scared.

Only one horse for two people to escape from Gus Wolker and his men simply wasn't enough horse. He tried to figure the smart thing to do, as he unsaddled his pony and turned it loose to find its way back to the lean-to barn. But there didn't seem to be any smart thing to do.

After hiding the saddle in a clump of brush, he struck out on foot along the narrow trail for Rustler's Canyon. It was rough going. He had about three miles of winding trail through the inky black badlands before he would reach the canyon proper. Suddenly he was more scared than ever. Suppose Helen lost her way and never reached the gully. Suppose— His feet went out from under him and he fell hard. Cursing his carelessness and the pain, he shoved to his feet and limped on.

The gully began with a sharp dip in the rocky ground. He eased down into it. After a hundred yards the gully deepened and widened into a rocky canyon. Eddie halted, made a funnel of his hands, and shouted, "Helen!"

There was no answer. He tried again. There was still no answer, except the echo of his own voice. He began to sweat a little, in spite of the cold. He could think of a thousand things that might have happened to the girl. He dropped down behind a boulder, out of the wind. He struck a match and glanced at the watch. Two-fifteen. It was going to be a long wait until daylight, he thought with a shudder.

Three hours later, or close to it, he heard the slow plodding of a horse. But there still wasn't any light, and he couldn't see a thing. Groaning at the cold and stiffness in his joints, he shoved to his feet. This could be Helen, or it could be a rider from the Triangle. He unlimbered his gun and waited.

The plodding drew nearer. Suddenly a gun shot cracked into the silence, and Eddie heard Helen's startled cry.

He moved fast then, toward the place where he'd heard her. Before he found her he heard the shouts of men and the pounding of hoofs. Then he came around a tumble of rocks and almost ran head-on into Helen's pony.

Somehow she knew him. She slid from the saddle and almost fell into his arms.

GUS WOLKER'S voice came from above and behind her. "Helen, listen to me. We've got you cornered. Better stay where you are."

"Come on. We're not cornered," Eddie whispered, leading the girl around the mass of rocks. "We'll get lost."

She laughed shakily, but it was a laugh, anyway. The girl had courage. "I'm pretty good at getting lost," she whispered. "Thought I never would find this place. And when I did I almost rode into Gus and another man."

"Only two of 'em?" Eddie didn't like that. "That likely means that Gus has sent someone the long away around to block the other end of the canyon."

"Can't we get there first?" Helen asked.

He told her about being on foot then. He also told her about the brown envelope. He dug the envelope from his pocket and put it into her hands.

"You go on," he said. "I'll stick here and give Gus something to think about."

She shoved the papers back into his hand. "No, Eddie. I've had enough of going it alone."

"That's crazy," Eddie argued doggedly. "All we have is a sixgun and maybe two dozen rounds of ammunition. When that's gone—Listen, if you go on now and hurry, you can get away."

Suddenly she reached up, pulled Eddie's face down, and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"Does that explain anything, Eddie?" she asked softly.

At that moment her horse caught the scent of the other Triangle horses. Lifting its head, it whinnied.

A shot crashed out of the darkness, and lead hammered past them.

"Stay where you are, Helen," Gus said in a hard, flat voice. "We don't want to hurt you, but if—"

"Save your breath, Gus," Spike Vargra cut in. "We want the girl and whatever legal papers she's run off with."

"She got hold of a gun someplace," Wolker called back.

Vargra let out a laugh. "She can't hit anything."

Eddie sent a shot crashing toward Vargra. He heard Both Gus and Vargras drop from their saddles to the ground. He caught Helen by the hand and they moved back toward the canyon wall.

It was impossible to hurry over the rocky ground without making some noise. Listening, Eddie could hear the two men trailing not far behind. He took Helen's hand and hurried on in the night.

Eddie and the girl came to some snow-crusted bushes and shoved through. A moment later Eddie heard Gus and Vargra pushing through the same bushes. Coming to the jagged canyon wall, Eddie and Helen edged along it until they came to an overhang that offered shelter from above. They squirmed into a cave-like opening and found a hiding place.

Behind a protecting ridge of granite Eddie led Helen to at least temporary safety and protection.

Eddie pulled out his gun and pressed it into the girl's hand.

"It won't take much shooting to keep 'em away until daylight," he said, "just a blast now and then to let 'em know you mean business."

WITHOUT giving her a chance to protest, he crawled out from behind the ledge. Lifting his face, he felt the pelting snow. He wasn't sure which scared him most—Gus and Vargra, or the blizzard. He'd lived in this country long enough to know that wind-driven snow was a killer up on the mountain trails.

He inched along slowly, following the canyon wall. Well away from the girl's shelter he circled, moving downslope and coming around behind the place where he expected to find Gus and Vargras. Twice he heard Helen send a warning blast out into the night. Twice Gus and Vargra answered with blasts of their own. But, crouching low, Eddie couldn't see the flash of the guns.

At last he found the Triangle horses ground-hitched among the boulders. And in the boot tied to one saddle he found what he was looking for—a rifle. After he'd made sure the gun was loaded, he squatted down out of the snow and wind to wait for daylight.

He didn't have long to wait. In less than an hour the first gray streaks of dawn appeared. Through the swirling grayness he saw the canyon wall gradually take shape. Then, suddenly, he spotted the overhang and the ridge behind which Helen crouched. Waiting, he pounded his hands together to drive away the numbness. Presently as the light grew stronger, he caught sight of a man snaking his way upward among the snow-covered bushes and boulders.

Eddie put the rifle to his shoulder, squinted along the barrel, and caught the crawling man in the sights. But he couldn't shoot a man like this. Lifting the gun a trifle, he began to squeeze the trigger.

"Hold it, Quinn!"

Eddie's finger froze. Slowly he lowered the rifle and turned his head. Red Anderson had come up behind him, a sixgun in his fist, his big hat tipped back on his bright red hair.

"Surprised to see me, Quinn?" Anderson spat between his teeth and grinned. "Came up from the other end of the canyon. Always was a quiet moving man. Part Injun, maybe."

Eddie let his glance flicker back to the crawling man. This time he saw a second man to the right of the first. They were working their way toward the overhang.

Eddie Quinn wasn't a fighter, but now he had to do what he could for this girl. She was the only thing in the world that meant anything to him. Gritting his teeth, he whirled, flung the rifle at Red Anderson, and dropped flat to the ground.

He heard Anderson's gun explode, heard the bullet scream an inch above his head. He heard the rifle smash against flesh and bone and, lifting his eyes, saw the man take the butt of the rifle against an up-flung arm.

ANDERSON cursed with pain, stumbled, and went down on his back. Eddie leaped like a crouching tiger. Anderson met the charge with lashing spurred boots, and sent Eddie rolling with a great gash in his right thigh. Eddie shoved upright, and the red-head came in swinging and cursing. Anderson knew how to use his fists.

Eddie caught a blow on the mouth. He gave ground. He tasted blood and was suddenly scared. He wanted to turn and run. But he thought of Helen and didn't run. He ducked in under a sledge-hammer blow and put his weight behind a short punch to the red-head's jaw. The impact of the blow almost shattered his hand.

Anderson groaned and went down as if he'd been hit with an ax. Eddie faced the canyon wall and saw that Gus and Vargra had turned downslope. He saw the flash of their lifted guns, heard the cry of lead. Crouching low, he began to look for the rifle.

It had gone in under a drift of snow, and he almost didn't find it in time. A bullet burned past him and whined off a rock, while he was digging the rifle out of the snow. Lying flat, he pulled the gun around and took hasty aim at the nearest man, Spike Vargra.

Vargra's gun flamed, and a spatter of snow and dirt stung Eddie's cheek. He squeezed trigger and missed. He jacked another shell into the chamber, fired.

Vargra stopped in the middle of a stride as if he'd slammed up against an invisible wall. He tottered there for a moment, looking astonished. Then, flinging his arms high, he rolled forward.

Gus Wolker had ducked from sight behind a row of boulders. Heart hammering, Eddie waited for Gus to start shooting. Instead of a shot he heard the pounding of hoofs.

Suddenly Gus flashed into sight. He had found the girl's pony and was riding desperately for the upper end of the canyon and the mountain trail beyond.

Eddie raised the rifle, but he didn't shoot. He let Gus Wolker go, to whatever fate was in store for him in that raging mountain blizzard.

"Eddie, are you all right?"

It was Helen calling to him. Turning, he saw her stumbling downslope toward him, her dark hair flying in the wind.

"Yeah," Eddie said, lifting his head. "I'm fine."

He hurried to meet her. He walked like a man who owned the world, which was the way he felt. The dream was back, stronger than ever. He still didn't have anything to offer this lovely, blue-eyed girl except himself, but now it was enough.

"Eddie," she whispered.

And the next thing he knew she was in his arms, smiling up expectantly at him.

Movie News Roundup by ROBERT CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

RANCH FLICKER TALK

A Review of Warner Bros.'

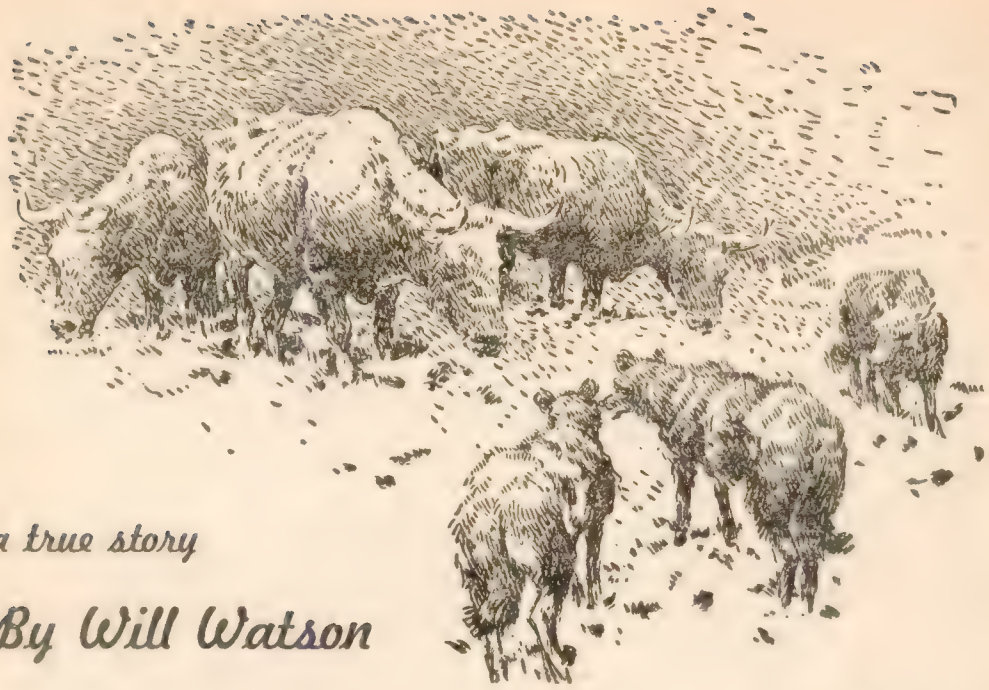
TALL MAN RIDING

with RANDOLPH SCOTT and DOROTHY MALONE

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

KIM NOVAK



a true story

By Will Watson

Winter of Hell

HE WAS a Gros Ventre buck, and he was very old. He was talking to the commander at Fort Keogh, Territory of Montana.

"Big owl, him come. Him live that way." The buck's arm swung toward the north, pointed across the snow-covered Montana hills. "Big owl, him mean winter. Cold winter."

The commander turned to an old scout who stood beside him. "What does he mean, Charlie?"

The guide knew the Gros Ventre. He explained. Arctic owls were coming south to winter in Montana—white owls, big, wide-winged snow owls.

"That means there's a winter of hell ahead, Commander," the guide explained.

The old buck nodded, eyes bright in his parchment-like skin. "Charlie, him right. Winter of hell—hard winter—she come."

That was the winter of 1886-87, the worst winter the big cattlemen ever witnessed. Snow came early—November 17, 1886—and it came with a blizzard, a strong, driving wind filled with swirling frozen snow. Within a few hours the rangelands of Montana Territory and Wyoming Territory were covered with snow that piled behind sagebrush behind drift fences, and filled coulees from rim to rim until they looked like level stretches.

Cattle were caught en route to railheads, and others drifted with the blizzards and died against cut-coulees and fences the nesters had strung out.

Then, on December 8th, hell hit in earnest.

At that time cowmen did not cut hay for winter feeding. Up till then the winters had, as a rule, been rather mild. Now cattle moved before the blizzards, bawling as they searched

for grass. But the grass was frozen under high drifts. The cattle died in the search.

COWPUNCHERS rode out garbed in heavy angora chaps, with woolen underwear, heavy shirts and pants, and heavy socks and overshoes. They rode weak, tired broncs, and they could do nothing. A few even left their bones with those of the dead cattle, victims of the "winter when the Arctic Circle moved south."

Cowboys, meeting, would exchange gloomy remarks.

"Anybody see hide or hair of Joe?"

"Three days ago Curly found his body over by the creek. Horse dead and Joe beside him. Wolves are eating good this winter."

"Joe was a good boy. Too bad."

"Man can't get too far from the home ranch or a good line camp this weather. If he does, he's a plumb fool. Well, see you come spring."

"If spring ever comes."

Indians—the Crows, the Sioux, the Cheyennes, the Gros Ventre—huddled in their buffalo lodges along rivers and creeks. Squaws hacked limbs from cottonwoods and box elders as feed for their tough, wiry ponies. They cut down red willows and kin-i-kin-ick and fed the branches to their ponies.

Horses had more of a chance to survive than did human beings or cattle, for a horse will paw snow until he can get at grass, while a cow does not paw. Still, the Indians lost about half of their horse herds. And to a redskin a horse was a valuable asset. The loss hit the red man where it hurt most.

Trees popped open under the intense cold, making sounds like a small cannon firing. Mountain men—the trapper—huddled close to their fires in their log cabins. Forgotten was the trap line. A man's life was worth more to him than a pile of fine beaver pelts.

Wild cattle, ribs showing, emaciated and weak, staggered into towns, almost as if demanding man to take care of them. They died in the streets—in Billings, in Red Lodge, in Cody—and lay there until spring, their ribs gaunt, their bellies flat, their eyes sunken.

Fish died, too. They died locked in a solid chamber of ice—trout, pike, suckers. When spring finally came and the creeks and rivers broke up, dead fish came to the surface of the muddy waters, their stench strong as whirlpools spun them.

But the wolves dined and grew fat, drifting with the storms. They were sleek gray ghosts moving through the snow. And with them came their followers, the coyotes, who were sleek too, their ribs coated with fat.

THERE was much wailing in the McQueen Hotel in Miles City, Montana Territory. Other ranch owners sat around warm fires in Great Falls and Cheyenne and Denver and moaned about their cattle. It occurred to some that they should have put up wild hay for winter feeding. But they were too late, far too late.

At that time Theodore Roosevelt, later to become President of the United States, was running cattle in South Dakota in the badlands. The winter of 1886-87 almost put him out of the cow business. Bones of his dead cattle lay along the Little Missouri and the edges of the badlands. He lost almost a hundred thousand dollars.

The discouraged cattlemen grumbled and drank, and listened to the howl of the northwest wind. And along the Big Muddy and the Yellowstone and the Wind other men listened and prayed for the blizzard to stop—the trapper in his log cabin with his traps and pelts hanging on the wall, and the Indian in his buffalo-skin lodge, sitting huddled over a smoky fire, the smell of grease and smoke and soot in his nostrils.

And when a white man would ask, "When will the blizzard end?" The buck would reply, "Nobody knows. The Medicine Man cannot get his medicine. No man alive knows."

"The wind! Listen to it!"

The buck would curse the wind too.

Buffalo died before the cold and the wind and the snow. By this time, of course, there were not many buffalos left. The useless slaughter in Kansas and Nebraska and the Strip had almost eradicated these animals. But there were still some, and the blizzard and the long, clinging, terrible winter further reduced their numbers.

One cowman expressed the opinion of many when he remarked, "This is the end of open range. This winter will take almost all the

cattle off this range. Many a cow that's dead now would be alive if it hadn't been for a nester's fence, or one of our own drift fences."

He was right, too. Cattle drift with a storm and look for shelter behind cut-coulees and along creek bottoms. But many did not reach shelter, because they ran into drift fences and the fences of the farmers. They stood there in meek submission, bawled, and froze to death and dropped.

Other cattlemen were saying, "The farmers are here to stay. The railroads are bringing in more of 'em every year. We've overgrazed our range. Because we overgrazed our range the feed is thin, and even if the winter hadn't been this hard our winter-kill still would have been big. We've kept in business because we haven't had to pay taxes on our range, as long as the Government owns it. But those days are gone now, because the farmers'll take up our range. They'll have legal titles, and that cuts us out."

Cowman decided they would have to own the range they used, or lease sub-marginal land from the Government. They would have to dam streams and raise hay and put up winter feed.

And they would have to raise fewer cattle, but better ones.

WHEN finally spring came, the big cowman was through. He was broke, his herds depleted, his range gone. He had learned a hard lesson at a terrible cost.

Rivers rushed downward, laden with icebergs that floated and spun and turned in the muddy water that was choked with washed-out trees. Occasionally the bloated carcass of a buffalo or a beef floated by.

But spring had come. Buffalo, shaggy and gaunt, losing their winter coats, grazed high along foothills, where they could watch the country below for riders. Death had driven the humpbacks into foothills, a habitat which was not native to them, for they were animals of the plains.

Redskins pulled down lodges, loaded gaunt ponies, and made ready to move out of river bottoms to keep from being flooded out. Dogs barked, squaws cackled, and kids ran and played. Somewhere a papoose wailed, and the sound was thin and faraway on the warm air.

And the old buck—the one who had seen the white owls, the one who had prophesied this terrible winter—sucked his pipe and sat crosslegged. Maybe he had seen other winters this hard, for he was old, and the old have seen much.

Coming up in the next issue

HANG UP YOUR GUNS

Gary Brand was the only man who could save the Copper King payroll . . . if he lived through the ambush he knew was ahead

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

SOUTH TO VIOLENCE

Starkey had killed a man to get the $20,000 . . . not knowing that an outlaw band had their own plan for taking the money

A Western Novelette

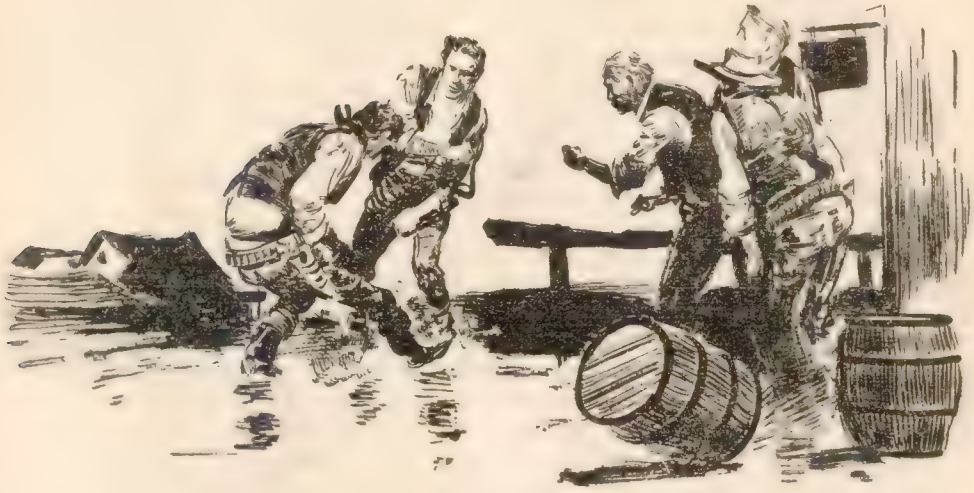
By J. L. BOUMA

VINCE RANDALL WAS going to clean up Marinoot . . . no matter

how many innocent people were killed along with the guilty

Red Sundown

by RAY GAULDEN



PART ONE

CLAY GANNON set the last cedar post for the new corral and saw that the sun was low over the Sangre de Cristo Range. He put the posthole digger in the barn and was starting for the house when his one rider, Emmett Miles, came up from the creek on a line-back dun.

"Thought you'd got lost, Emmett," Clay said, smiling.

"And I figured you'd be on your way to Marinoot by now," Emmett said.

"Was hoping you'd come along."

Emmett was a small man, close to sixty, but his back was straight and his eyes hadn't dimmed. He said, "From what I just heard, a man might be safer if he stayed home. I ran into the Jamesons on their way home from town. Harry was on the jury that tried Floyd Burl today."

Clay said, "They going to hang him?"

"No, they let him off with a life sentence, but Floyd figured they should have turned him loose. Claimed he shot that gambler in self-defense. He told those twelve jury boys he was going to bust out and kill every one of them."

"He's tough enough to do it," Clay said. "So are the rest of the Burls, and with Al and Pinto still running loose, no telling what'll happen."

Emmett said, "The whole town's plenty worried. They called off the dance tonight."

"I'm still going in," Clay said.

He went up to the log house, noting that some of the shakes on the roof were loose. When a man stopped helling around he sure found a lot that needed doing. The place ought to have a porch and another room. A girl like Jean Randall couldn't be expected to live in the house the way it was.

As he shaved at the wash-bench outside, Emmett Miles came up from the corral, working on a chew of tobacco in thoughtful silence.

Clay looked at himself in the cracked mirror above the bench, seeing how sun and wind had roughened the skin of his broad face. His nose was crooked, something he could thank Willie Boon for. Clay had been in a lot of kid fights. He couldn't remember now what they were about.

FINALLY Emmett said, "Sam Kane has been waiting a long time to pin something on Floyd Burl."

"That sheriff won't rest easy, though," Clay said, "till Al and Pinto are locked up, too."

Emmett said soberly, "It's not just Al and Pinto he's thinking about."

Clay said without looking around, "He doesn't have to worry about me any more."

"He's got you pegged for a wild one, the same as everybody else in Marinoot, and a couple of months on your good behavior hasn't changed their minds."

Clay ran the comb through his thick black hair. "I haven't been in a poker game, taken a drink, or had a fight in—"

"Since you started hanging around that Randall girl." Emmett shook his head worriedly. "You're riding for a fall. Sure, I can see how a pretty girl could get a man's noggin all fogged up, but it won't turn out like you're hoping."

"Why not?"

"Because Jean's old man owns the bank and half the town. Why, Vince Randall would no more let her marry a two-bit rancher like you, than he'd loan money to a man without plenty of security."

"You talk too much," Clay said. "And don't try to tell me you won't go to town because you're scared of a ruckus."

Emmett scowled. "I'm getting too old for nights in town. Now I like to be by myself, and not worry if there's tobacco juice on the front of my shirt."

"Maybe I just better shoot you," Clay said.

"Don't worry about me. I'm getting along fine. Got a good bunk, plenty to eat, and do just about as I blamed well please."

That was true, Clay thought. Emmett had come to work on the ranch for Clay's dad fifteen years ago, and after the folks died Emmett had stayed on, the only hand. But he was more than that.

"You should have got married," Clay told him.

Emmett's face was serious. "Me, I just wasn't cut out to get messed up with no female. I like being by myself too much."

"That's not good for a man."

"Maybe not for some, but I like being out under that big sky, listening to the wind whispering in the grass."

"The wind can't whisper to you like a woman can."

"Depends on what you want to hear," Emmett said.

Clay saddled his black gelding and hit an easy pace along the creek trail. By the time he got to town the sun was only a tawny haze lingering atop the Sangre de Cristos.

Shadows lay thick about the old sandstone courthouse. Glancing at the barred windows of the jail on the second floor, he remembered nights he had spent there after a fight at the town hall or Murphy's Saloon. Some tough boys used to take in the dances, and he was always running into them. But that was before he started seeing Jean Randall.

HE HAD known Jean ever since he was a kid, and maybe he had loved her as far back as that. He used to go past the big Randall house over on Harwood Street just so he could get a look at her in the yard. One time when she had been playing with a ball and it had gone into the street, he had handed it to her through the fence. They

had just stood there and looked at each other until Vince Randall came out and ran Clay off.

Jean didn't go to many of the dances, but sometimes she went for drives in her buggy. He had come upon her two months ago, and since then they had been meeting once a week near the creek back of town.

Wide and clean, Main Street stretched ahead of him, its buildings frame and adobe for the most part. Once it had been wide open, with a dozen saloons going full blast, but Sam Kane had closed all except one of them, and had driven out the tinhorns and the dance-hall girls. The old crowd, the boys Clay used to drink and carouse with, were getting hard to find.

But the Burls had stayed, running their ranch back in the hills, and going from bad to worse after their father, old Ivan Burl, died. Now Floyd had killed a man and a jury had sentenced him to spend the rest of his life in the prison at Canon City. And Clay had drunk out of the same bottle with Floyd.

Fewer people than usual were on the street, and even they seemed to be in a hurry. Lew Witham, coming out of his saddle shop, sent an uneasy glance at the courthouse, then went on, walking briskly toward Murphy's Saloon.

The town was on edge, Clay thought, and it had a right to be. Floyd Burl didn't talk just to hear himself. If Floyd had promised to break jail, he would try it, and when Floyd set out to kill twelve men, there was a good chance he might get some of them, or others who got in his way.

The hotel was on his left, a two-story frame building with a long front porch. A small voice called from an upstairs window, "Hello, Clay."

"Howdy, Mike," he said, smiling as he reined in. "How you making out?"

She was eight years old and her name was Michelle, but she'd always been Mike to him. Her round face was shining as she leaned out the window.

"I told Mommy you'd come to see us tonight." She glanced over her shoulder. "Mommy, it's Clay. I just knew he'd be here."

"Got to put my horse up," Clay said. "See you later."

"You won't be long, will you?" Mike leaned farther out the window.

"You be careful there," Clay called.

A woman appeared at the window and put her hands on the child's shoulders.

"Howdy, Valla," Clay said, as he started to ride on.

"Hello, Clay." She smiled and lifted her hand.

When he was past the hotel he glanced back. Valla, he thought, was a fine woman, and the people in this town should admire her instead of running her down the way they did.

Maybe she had made a mistake running away from home to marry Johnny McCord, but she'd been only sixteen at the time. And Johnny had always known how to smooth talk a girl. Maybe Johnny would have turned out different if his dad hadn't died and left him the hotel. Johnny'd had money to throw away, time for running around, and a weakness for women, even after he and Valla were married. Then he got mixed up with a girl from a traveling show troup, and she killed him one night.

Valla had been running the hotel ever since, doing all the work, even cooking and taking care of the dining room. On top of that she had Mike to raise, and Clay figured she was doing a good job of it. But the townsfolk refused to let her live down the McCord name.

Remembering some of the gossip, Clay thought, why is it some folks have such dirty little minds?

AT THE livery stable he rode through the double doors into the smell of hay and horses and leather. Walt Reddick, the stable owner, was talking to Turk Hester, a puncher who worked for one of the big outfits in the upper valley.

"Walt and I are having a drink," Hester said. "Walt was on the jury, so we're sort of celebrating the end of the trial."

Clay said, "I hear Floyd didn't like the verdict."

"He got what was coming to him," Reddick said, but there was uneasiness in his voice. "Sam'll be taking him to Canon City tomorrow."

"If he doesn't bust out before then," Hester said, grinning. "I sure wouldn't care to be in your boots, Walt."

Reddick said with a confidence that wasn't in his eyes, "He won't get away." He reached for the bottle. "Give me that, and stop talking about the Burls." He took a big drink, choked on it, and held the bottle out to Clay.

Clay said, "I'm on the wagon."

"Sure," Hester said, winking at Reddick. He drifted outside.

Clay didn't like Hester; he never had. Something about the man rubbed him the wrong way. Two months ago he would have told Hester what he could do, but he hadn't come to town looking for trouble tonight.

When Clay went outside the barn, Hester was leaning against the front of it.

"What's your rush?" he asked as Clay started on past. "Going over to the hotel to see Valla?"

Clay felt his insides tightening. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Hell, no," Hester said. "A lot of us boys go over there now and then. Pretty good stuff if you ask—"

He didn't finish because Clay's fist was in his mouth, a quick, hard blow that caused boards to rattle as Hester's head struck the barn siding. He tried to catch himself, failed, and fell to the ground.

"You shot off your mouth once too often," Clay said, looking down at him.

Hester sat in the dirt, shaking his head to clear it. Blood began to drip off his chin. He touched his mouth and looked at his red fingers.

"You dirty son," he said between his teeth.

CLAY watched him get to his feet and knew it would take more than one blow to put Hester down again. He was all bone and muscle, a man who could take punishment and hand out his own. What was coming would be savage and brutal, something Clay would once have welcomed. Now the old eagerness was missing, and there was only resentment.

He waited until Hester came lunging in, and then hit him on the jaw. Hester came back with a chopping right that ripped the skin on Clay's left cheek.

Clay kept his eyes on Hester, but he knew that men were running along the street, coming from different directions. A crowd gathered, men jostling one another to see.

"I told you it'd be Clay Gannon, Frank," someone said.

"And I'm telling you Turk'll make him wish he'd stayed home."

Hester had had his share of brawls where a man uesd more than his fists. He kept boring in, trying to get Clay on the ground, and Clay kept driving him back. A vicious blow to the chin forced Clay to give ground, and before he could catch his balance Hester was on him, coming in low. They went to the ground, rolling, grunting.

The taste of dirt was in Clay's mouth. He kept hitting, and being hit in return. When he started to get up a knee lifted under his chin and put him back down. Dazed, he lay there while Hester jumped up to use his boots. Clay saw one of them coming and turned his head, but the boot toe caught his ear, numbing it, bringing blood.

Clay rolled and got away. He came to his feet and could feel the blood running down his neck, but his head was clearing.

"Atta boy, Turk!" someone yelled. "You got him going now."

Hester put his head down, set to lunge again, but Clay moved in and caught him with a solid right. As Hester was going back, Clay followed and hit him again. Hester went down and Clay landed on top of him, using both fists, driving blow after blow into the man's face. The thought was in Clay's mind, leave him so he'll remember the next time he opens his dirty mouth about Valla.

The excited murmur of the crowd had died down. Men stood in a tight circle, not saying anything. It was quiet except for the sound of Clay's fists.

"All right, Gannon." A man shoved through the crowd. "You've had your fun."

Clay, still on his knees, looked up. Sheriff Sam Kane was standing there with a gun in his hand.

"He asked for it," Clay said, getting to his feet.

Sam Kane was a lanky man, only forty-five, but he looked much older. His face was long and bony and there were brooding shadows in his gray eyes. Clay had never seen him smile. He wondered if anybody else ever had.

"Sure, he asked for it," Kane said, his voice

thin with scarcasm. "You tried to talk him out of it, but Turk wouldn't listen."

A townsman spoke from back in the crowd. "I don't know what it was about, Sam. They were just standing there, talking, and all of a sudden Gannon let him have it."

Clay glanced down at Hester, lying in the dirt unconscious. He knew how it looked to Kane and the townsmen. Wild Clay Gannon

VALLA

had come to town primed for trouble, the way he'd been doing since he was a kid. He'd picked a fight with Hester for the pure hell of it.

"Some of you boys get Turk down to the doc's place," Kane said, without taking his eyes off Clay. "When he's in shape to ride, tell him I said to get out of town. Now let's break this up."

Four men carried Hester down the street, and the rest of the crowd began to drift away. Clay's hat had been stepped on and his clothes we recovered with dust. A sleeve of his shirt had been ripped from the shoulder down, and blood stained the collar. While he was shaping the crown of his Stetson, Kane spoke again.

"Let's go."

"You mean you're locking me up?"

"I sure am."

Clay swore, but he knew there was nothing he could say that would change Kane's mind. He'd tried arguing with the sheriff before.

A night he had been looking forward to, Clay thought sourly, and he was going to spend it in jail.

VALLA McCORD pulled the shades in the living room, wondering why she couldn't get Clay out of her mind. Michelle, in her nightgown, was sitting on the floor, looking at a picture book.

"Bedtime, young lady," Valla told her.

Michelle pouted. "It's too early, Mommy. I don't want to be asleep when Clay comes."

"I don't imagine he'll come tonight, honey," Valla said, smiling. "He has other people to see besides us."

"Who else, Mommy? You said Clay didn't have many friends."

"Well, he has some. Now you come on and hop in bed."

"Carry me, Mommy."

Valla carried her into the bedroom, put her down on the foot of the small wooden bed, turned back the covers.

"All right, in you go."

Michelle scrambled under the covers.

When she was tucked in, Michelle became serious. "Mommy, when I grow up, could Clay and I get married?"

Valla laughed softly. "I'm afraid you're a little young to be thinking about getting married."

"How old were you?"

Valla looked away, memories crowding her mind. "Sixteen," she said quietly. "Not old enough."

"Why do you have to be a certain age, Mommy?"

Valla smiled at her. "You'll find out soon enough. Now go to sleep."

"I wish you didn't have to work all the time, Mommy. We could have lot of fun."

Valla kissed her and smoothed her hair, thinking how much Michelle looked like her father. Johnny had been a handsome man, always laughing and full of life.

"Night, honey."

"Night."

Valla blew out the lamp and turned the wick of the one in the living room down low. The windows of their three rooms looked onto the street. She went out, glancing at some of the doors as she walked down the hall. Fifteen rooms and only five of them rented. She shook her head, wondering if she should get after the ones who were behind. Mr. Abers hadn't paid in two months, but she wouldn't say anything to him.

When she passed the room where Johnny had been killed, memories again came back. Johnny's father had been to blame, she told herself. He had spoiled Johnny, giving him all the money he wanted to spend. And after they were married, Johnny's father had died and left them the hotel.

IT HAD been fun at first, the two of them running the hotel. She had been too innocent to realize what kind of place the hotel was, and so much in love with Johnny she hadn't cared about anything else.

When Michelle was two, Johnny had grown restless aagin and spent more and more time away from the hotel, leaving Valla to run the business. And so it had gone until the night she heard the shot and ran up to find Johnny dead on the floor in a woman's room.

It had taken her a long time to get over that.

In the empty lobby she glanced at the four black leather chairs that were beginning to sag, and wondered if they could be repaired. But Michelle would need clothes for school in the fall.

She went on into the dining room. None of the six tables was occupied, but a man was standing at the street window looking out. He turned and she saw that it was Deputy Sheriff Ben Poe.

"Thought maybe you'd closed up and I wouldn't get my coffee," Poe said, smiling at her.

He was a small man, solidly built, but shorter than most of the men in Marinoot. For this reason Ben wore extremely high heels on his boots.

"There's coffee on the stove," Valla said. "I'll get you a cup."

Ben followed her and stood in the kitchen doorway. "You won't be working in here," he said, "after we're married."

"I haven't said I'd marry you, Ben."

He grinned, toying with the butt of the white-handled gun he wore low on his left thigh. "You women are all alike in one way. Figure you're supposed to play hard to get."

"It's not a game with me, Ben. I've told you before. I don't love you."

Something mean came into his eyes. "Why don't you go ahead and say I'm not big enough to suit you."

She poured the coffee and started back to the dining room with it. "Ben," she said, "your size has nothing to do with it, but you can't seem to get that through your head."

He was very sensitive about his size.

On the street when he talked to a tall man he usually would stand on the steps of a store.

"I thought you'd have to stay at the jail tonight," she said, wanting to change the subject.

"I figured they wouldn't miss me if I went out for a few minutes."

"What if Al and Pinto Burl came and there was only Ed Mack at the jail?"

He made a wry face. "You've been listening to too much of the loose talk that's going on."

VALLA sat down at the table and Ben took a chair beside her. "Don't you think the people have a right to be afraid, after the threat Floyd made?" she asked.

He shook his head. "How's a man locked up as tight as Floyd going to cause any trouble?"

"He might get out with Al's and Pinto's help."

Ben said, patting his gun, "I told them where to get off, told them if they weren't careful I'd have them in jail, too."

The only thing big about Ben Poe, Valla thought, was his head, and it was full of wind. She had wondered many times what Ben

would do in a situation that required courage. She felt sure he had taken the deputy job only to impress people.

Of one thing she was certain. Al and Pinto Burl would not stay away from Marinoot because they were afraid of Ben Poe, or of Sam Kane either. It would take more than loud talk to keep them out of town.

Ben said, "The townsfolk are worked up over nothing. In the morning Sam will take Floyd down to Canon City, and that will be the end of it."

Valla hoped he was right, because she knew what kind of men the Burls were. Their father, Ivan Burl, had been one of the first to settle in this part of the country. He had helped build Marinoot and had looked upon it as his town. He had ridden high until Vince Randall and Sam Kane came along.

Old Ivan had gotten into financial trouble, had been forced to borrow heavily from Randall's bank, and had lost the big ranch. With his three sons he had gone into the hills, buying a small outfit with the little money he had left.

When Ivan Burl died broke, a short time later, his sons put the blame on Vince Randall —maybe rightly so, Valla thought. The banker was a smug, self-righteous man. She wondered what kind of place Marinoot would be if Randall had his way.

He had been foreman of the jury that sentenced Floyd. Not that Floyd wasn't guilty, but she doubted that the rest of the jury would have been so hard on him.

Ben Poe was bragging about what he had done and said during the day—empty talk Valla had heard so many times before she only half listened. She wondered how much longer he'd stay, but could think of no way to get rid of him.

She got up and walked to the window. It was dark now and lamplight made yellow pools in the brown dust. Two horsemen were riding slowly down the street and people were ducking into doorways.

"Ben," she called, "Al and Pinto are in town."

She heard his cup rattle against the saucer. He said unbelievingly, "They wouldn't show up here after the warning I gave them."

"See for yourself," Valla said.

LAMPLIGHT fell across their faces. Pinto, the youngest of the three brothers, was smiling. He was only nineteen or twenty, but his eyes had that reckless Burl shine.

Al, two years older than Pinto, had a round, fleshy face, and nothing about him, except for his eyes, looked like the other Burls.

Both men rode with their hands close to their guns.

Ben Poe, moving up beside Valla, swore softly and started for the kitchen. He said over his shoulder, "I left my horse in the alley."

She heard the door slam, but felt sure Ben's horse was not out back. Later Ben would have some good excuse why he hadn't been able to find the Burls.

The street was deserted except for Al and Pinto who rode on as though enjoying the excitement their appearance had caused. There was no sign of Ben Poe when they were lost in darkness at the end of the street.

Across the street a man stuck his head from a doorway slowly, cautiously, and presently others began to venture out. It was hard to believe that three men, one of them in jail, could bring fear to an entire town.

Hal Abers, one of Valla's roomers, came in, smiled, and said, "The Burl boys caused quite a stir, didn't they?"

"I have a feeling they'll be back," Valla said.

"Did you hear about the fight Turk Hester and Clay Gannon had? It was a real knock-down-and-drag-out," Abers said. "Turk got the worst of it, but Sam Kane's thrown Clay in jail."

Valla picked up the cup and saucer Ben Poe had left on a table, and went to the kitchen to do the dishes. She thought of Clay, of his easy, relaxed way of sitting his saddle. Then she frowned, sure he had been on his way to see Jean Randall.

It won't work, Clay, she thought. Vince Randall won't be satisfied until he has run you out of town.

And he has Sam Kane to help him at every turn.

She knew that Randall wanted to be rid of her, too.

And the banker usually got his way, one way or another.

WHEN Clay and Sam Kane reached the courthouse, Jailer Ed Mack was getting a drink of water from the cooler in the sheriff's office. Mack, a skinny old man with not much hair, had worn the same sweat-stained suspenders ever since Clay could remember.

"Howdy, Clay," Mack said.

Sam Kane was scowling. "The jail's upstairs," he said. "How come you're down here?"

"I just came to get a drink of water. Anything wrong with that?"

Kane made an impatient gesture, then glanced about the office. "Where's Ben?"

"Went out to get a cup of coffee."

The sheriff swore. "I told him not to leave till I got back. What have I got a deputy for, anyhow?"

Ed Mack hitched up trousers several sizes too large for him. He said, "Ben knew I'd be here to keep my eyes on things."

"Ed," Kane said with disgust, "if trouble broke, you'd be useless."

"You may be glad I'm around here before the night's over," Mack told him. "May wish you'd hired a couple of extra deputies, too."

"I don't need any deputies," Kane said. "I put Floyd in jail and I'll keep him there till I take him to Canon City tomorrow."

That was like the sheriff, Clay thought—too stubborn to admit there might be trouble he couldn't handle.

"The Burls stick together," Mack said. "I watched those boys grow up."

"You let them get away with too much," Kane said.

"I wore the badge for twenty years in this town and I never had a complaint till that money lender came along. If you and he have your way, Marinoot won't be a fit place for a man to live in."

"If you don't like it," Kane said, "you can always leave."

"Why don't you go ahead and say that if it weren't for you I'd be out in the street, just an old has-been?"

Boots pounded in the hall outside the office, and Joe Shire, the barber, appeared in the doorway, out of breath.

"Al and Pinto just rode into town," he panted.

Kane said confidently, "They just want to throw a little scare into folks."

Shire said, "I'd feel better if you had those two locked up till you get Floyd out of town."

Ed Mack said dryly, "You've got to wait till a man breaks the law before you can throw him in jail."

KANE growled to Shire, "You and the rest of the town are getting in a lather over nothing, Joe. I've seen plenty of men like the Burls, and I never ran across one yet I couldn't handle."

Shire said worriedly, "I've got a wife and two kids at home, Sam. If those boys try to wipe out the town there's going to be some stray bullets flying."

"I tell you Floyd was just making big talk, Joe. Ben's up town. He'll see that Al and Pinto don't start anything."

When Shire had gone, Kane said to Mack, "Take Gannon upstairs."

"Sam," Clay said, "what's it going to get you, locking me up for the night?"

"It'll keep you out of trouble."

"I won't cause any more trouble."

"I know you won't—not tonight."

Clay said steadily, "I've been behaving myself for two months. I even stopped packing a gun."

Kane said, "And you hadn't been in town ten minutes till you tangled with Hester. If it hadn't been him, you'd have run across somebody else. Lock him up, Ed."

Ed Mack said, "Let's go, Clay."

He led Clay down the hall that led to the stairway. When they were out of hearing distance of the office Mack said, "I don't know what to make of that man."

"What's he trying to prove, anyway?" Clay asked

"I think he hates the world and everybody in it, including himself. He and Randall seem to see things alike. Maybe that's why Randall sent for him, talked folks into believing I was too old for the job."

Clay said musingly, "Vince Randall carries a lot of weight."

Mack said, as though talking to himself, "Folks seem to forget I was the law in this town back in the days when it was really tough."

"You were a good sheriff, Ed."

They climbed the stairs to the second floor. Ed Mack went on, "So after twenty years of being sheriff, I wind up as jailer. But you know what I am really? Sam Kane's flunky!"

"Floyd giving you any trouble?"

"Oh, he threw a scare into those boys on the jury in the courtroom this morning, but he hasn't tried anything here so far. He just sits there in his cell like he had everything all figured out and was waiting for the right time."

"You think he'll try to make a break?"

"I know he will. Maybe not tonight, but it's a long way between here and Canon City. Kane thinks Al and Pinto are afraid to try anything. He doesn't know those boys like I do. They're not afraid of anything."

The jail office was a small room, containing only a cot and a desk. The cot sagged in the middle and was covered with a gray blanket, full of cigarette burns. Ed Mack unlocked the heavy iron door at the back of the room.

"It isn't the first time you've been here," he said, "so you know the way."

Clay wrinkled his nose at the familiar smell of disinfectant. Why did they use so much of the stuff? He looked down the short corridor, dimly lighted by a lamp in a wall bracket, and saw that only one of the six cells was occupied.

Floyd Burl, lying on his cot, heard them coming and got up. Lamplight fell across his square face.

"Brought you some company, Floyd," Mack said, opening the cell across from him. "I reckon you and Clay'll get along all right."

FLOYD asked, "Al and Pinto been around town?"

"They rode through a little while ago," Mack told him. "Kept on going."

Floyd grinned. "I'll bet that gutless bunch that were on the jury sure hunted their holes."

Mack locked the door of Clay's cell and looked at Burl. "When you figuring on trying to get away, Floyd?"

Burl laughed. "Now wouldn't you like to know?"

"It don't make much difference to me," Mack said. "Sam Kane's the sheriff now. You're his worry."

"Yeah, I reckon you got a dirty deal from this town, too, Ed, but to me you're still a badge toter. So when I come back you better not get in my way."

Mack shook his head sadly. "You never were easy to get along with, Floyd. Now you're meaner than ever."

Silent and sullen, Floyd only stared as the old jailer left the corridor and locked the heavy door behind him.

The window in Clay's cell was small and too high for a man to stand and look out, but he could see a black patch of sky and a handful of stars. One of them kept winking, reminding him that he would be with Jean now if it hadn't been for Turk Hester. His hot temper always got him in trouble. But he knew that, if it happened again, he'd hit Turk just as hard and just as fast.

He wondered if Jean had heard about the fight and knew he was in jail. Or would she be waiting for him near the creek back of town? He kept remembering how she looked with the moonlight on her hair and that slow smile on her face.

Floyd Burl said, "What have they got you in for?"

"I had a run-in with Turk Hester."

Burl said, "I hope you stomped his guts out."

Things are in bad shape when they throw a man in jail for letting off steam."

Clay considered that for a moment, then said, "The old days are gone, Floyd. A man's got to change too if he wants to get along."

"Funny talk coming from you," Burl said. "We grew up together and I always figured you didn't care whether school kept or not." He added, with a hint of derision, "So now you aim to quit your wild ways, get married and raise a batch of kids." He laughed. "You might wind up being a deacon."

Clay looked at Burl through the bars. "You don't think I can change, huh?"

Burl shook his head. "You've got a wild streak, a kind of a devil in you. It's in me, too. It won't let us be like other men."

Clay said quietly, "If a man wants to, he can do it."

There was moodiness in Burl's eyes. "I don't want to be any different," he said. "I was living the way I wanted to."

"You went too far when you killed that gambler."

Burl said bitterly, "A no-good tinhorn! I did the town a favor."

"The jury figured different."

Burl said in a low, harsh tone, "That sanctimonious bunch! It was all cut and dried what they were going to give me, even before the trial. Vince Randall got himself made foreman, and the rest of them did just what he told them to."

"They could have hung you."

"That would have been better than what I got. Locked up behind four walls for the rest of my life, and all for killing a two-bit card-sharp that pulled them off the bottom of the deck! No, they railroaded me, and I'm going to pay off every mother's son that was on that jury. And if you think *you're* going to get somewhere in this two-bit burg, you're crazy. They've got the sign on you, and it'll stay there as long as you stick around."

Clay stretched out on the cot. He looked up at the window. The star was still there, looking sad and lonesome in the blackness.

He wondered if Floyd would try to bust out tonight or if he would wait until tomorrow. Of one thing he was sure—Floyd wasn't bluffing.

IN THE big house on Harwood Street, Jean Randall was waiting for her father to come home to supper. It was past seven. What was keeping him? It would soon be time for her to meet Clay, but her father would be displeased if she weren't here to have dinner with him.

Restless, she went into the dining room and moved past the long table with its fine linen tablecloth and the high-backed chairs that gleamed in the lamplight. Then she went on into the kitchen. Mary Estes, the hired girl, was busy with a mixing bowl.

"What are we having for supper, Mary?" Jean asked absently.

"Baked ham and sweet potatoes," Mary said. "Is Mr. Randall home yet?"

"No. I don't know what's keeping him."

Mary put a dish in the warming oven of the big wood range. "Maybe he stopped to have a drink with some of the other jurymen."

"Perhaps."

Mary turned to the sink and began working the pump handle, drawing water into a large pitcher.

"I think I hear him now," she said, and Jean left the kitchen.

Vince Randall, a large heavy-boned man of fifty, smiled when he saw her. Then he noticed her dress and frowned.

"Mrs. Tucker made it for me," Jean said, pirouetting for him. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Daring is more the word for it."

Jean went over and kissed him. "Stop being so grumpy and tell me how nice I look."

"I can't see that being half dressed is becoming to you."

"Oh, Dad!"

He continued to stare at her in disapproval. "Jean, how will it make me look in this town if people see you in a dress that's—well, not decent?"

She looked at him searchingly. "When mother was living you were different. Now you're concerning yourself too much with people's morals."

He made an impatient gesture. "Jean, it seems to me you should admire what I'm trying to do."

"What are you trying to do?" she asked quietly.

An intent expression came into his eyes. "I want to make Marinoot a community of decent, respectable citizens."

She had heard these words before, and they failed to answer her question. Why was her father becoming such a fanatic on the subject of decency? It disturbed her, made her wonder if his sex life had something to do with it. After her mother died he hadn't gone with another woman, and he would never frequent a house of ill repute.

ALL during supper, Jean picked at her food, sitting at one end of the long table. Her father sat at the other end. She wondered what he would say if he knew she were going out to meet Clay. She tried to make conversation, asking him how the trial had gone.

"Floyd Burl deserved to be hanged," Randall said. "But I couldn't get the rest of them to go along with me on that."

Jean wondered where they had found the courage to go against him. "I hear there was quite a scene in the courtroom," she said idly.

Randall nodded. "Floyd made some big talk, threatening what he would do, but I've seen his kind before."

"What about his brothers?"

"They've been warned to stay away from Marinoot. If they don't, Kane will have them in prison, too."

It was talk that held little interest for Jean. Her thoughts were of Clay, and now that it was almost time to meet him she was conscious of a growing excitement.

Vince Randall said with satisfaction, "Sam Kane has done a good job, but there's sitll Clay Gannon and that McCord woman."

Jean was glad he was not looking at her, for she felt sure her expression would have given her away. She said defensively, "Sheriff Kane was telling me just the other day that Clay hasn't been causing any trouble for two months."

"He's caused nothing but trouble ever since I can remember," Randall said, jabbing his fork into a piece of meat. "He'll end up killing someone, like Floyd Burl did." He frowned at her. "Why should you uphold a man like Clay Gannon?"

"Because I can't stand the way you and Sam Kane are trying to make this town into what you think it should be, deciding who should live here and who shouldn't. Aren't you satisfied with having most of the people eating out of your hand? Do you have to have them all?"

Angry now, Randall got up from the table. "I don't understand all this criticism I've been getting from you lately. And another thing. Alex Norris tells me you've made first one excuse and then another to keep from seeing him."

Jean said softly, "Did it ever occur to you that I might not be in love with Alex?"

"Not in love with him? You've been going with him for years. You're practically engaged. Alex is the best cashier I've ever had —reliable, efficient. Why, he'll be president of the bank some day."

"I know," Jean said. "He's the man you've picked out for me, and I'm supposed to make the best of it."

"He's the only man suitable for you in this town, so try being a little nicer to him." He turned toward the hall. "I'm going into the study for a while. If Alex drops by don't start complaining of a headache."

The clock struck eight, and Jean stood in indecision. Clay would be waiting for her. All week she had looked forward to meeting him, but now if Alex were coming her father would be furious if she wasn't here to entertain him.

Ever since she could remember, her father had told her what she could do and what she couldn't. Tonight she didn't care what he said. Quickly she let herself out the front door. A man was coming across the porch. It was Alex Norris, hat in hand and not one blond hair out of place.

"Good evening, Jean."

"Hello, Alex," she said, trying to smile.

"You weren't going somewhere, were you?"

"I'm sorry, Alex," Jean said, "but I promised Lottie Benson I'd come over and help her with a new dress she's making. If I'd only known sooner that you were coming—"

Alex looked at the porch chairs. "It won't hurt if you're a few minutes late, will it?"

"I suppose not." Jean was thinking of Clay as she sat down.

"Lot of excitement up town," Alex said, taking the chair next to her. "Al and Pinto Burl just rode through. But everybody's afraid they'll come back."

JEAN thought that, in spite of the way he talked, her father was uneasy, too. She remembered his saying there was still Clay Gannon and that McCord woman. She knew Clay was rough, reckless, but he was trying to change if they would only give him a chance.

"Let's talk about more pleasant things," Alex said.

Jean looked at his face in the moonlight. He was handsome enough, but there was a softness about him. Why didn't she tell him she didn't love him?

"Jean, you know how I feel about you."

Any minute now he would be trying to kiss her, something she couldn't stand, not tonight, not with Clay waiting for her. She could see him there on the creek bank with

one shoulder against the cottonwood, cigarette smoke drifting up around his strong, brown face.

She stood up, saying, "I really must get on over to Lottie's."

"It seems there's always something, Jean," Alex said, showing his disappointment as he got to his feet.

"I haven't been feeling well, lately, Alex."

He put his hands on her shoulders, caressing her with soft fingers. "Jean," he whispered, "don't keep putting me off."

He was more ardent tonight than usual. Was it because of the low-cut dress she was wearing? A dress she'd made for Clay?

"I know, Alex," she said. "And I'm very fond of you."

"But you don't love me?"

"Give me more time, Alex." She smiled again. "Come on. You can walk me down to Lottie's."

Alex left her at the Benson's gate, lingering until she knew the only thing to do was kiss him and get it over with. She made it as brief as possible.

Jean waited in the shadows until he was out of sight, then hurried toward the creek. Clay would be waiting at the log bridge, then they would go down to the old cottonwood, their rendezvous, where they could be alone. In Clay's arms she could forget her father and Alex.

She reached the bridge, but there was no sign of Clay. She was late, but before he had always waited. Something had detained him. He'd be along any minute.

She walked up and down the bridge, looking in the direction of town, for he would be coming that way. She listened for the sound of his horse, but the silence was broken only by the whisper of water under the bridge.

AFTER half an hour she knew he wasn't coming, that something had happened. He had told her he didn't like this slipping around in the dark, that he didn't see why they couldn't tell her father that they loved each other and wanted to get married.

She had tried to get him to understand that this was the only possible way they could be together. Her father would never consent, but she would find some other way.

Clay had agreed to wait, but perhaps he had decided she was only looking for a thrill with a man with whom she was ashamed to be seen in public.

She was almost home when Dr. Nandeen drove by in his buggy. "Evening, Miss Randall," Nandeen said, stopping the team. "Out for a little walk?"

"Yes, Doctor. It's warm this evening."

"I haven't had supper yet," Nandeen said. "I was just ready to leave the office when they brought Turk Hester in." He shook his head. "Clay Gannon certainly worked him over."

"You mean there was a fight?" Jean asked.

"I'll say there was." Nandeen chuckled. "Gannon got the best of it, but Sam Kane threw him in jail. Well, I had better be getting on home."

"Good night, Doctor."

Jean went on, thinking how much she had wanted to see Clay. Instead of meeting her he had gotten into trouble, after promising her he wouldn't.

You'll never tame him, she thought. No woman will.

* * * * *

Morning sunlight, slanting through the high cell window, fell across Clay's face and brought him awake. He got up, stretching and shaking the kinks out of his legs. In the cell across from him Floyd Burl was walking up and down, evidently in no mood for conversation.

Clay's left hand was stiff, and he remembered the fight with Hester, recalling Turk's boot in his ear. The ear wasn't hurting, but blood had dried on his neck, his shirt was a mess, and one leg of his pants was torn. He would have to get some new clothes as soon as they let him out.

PRESENTLY the door at the end of the corridor opened and Ed Mack came in, rattling his key ring. He said, "Well, I see you're still here, Floyd."

"Yeah, but I'll bet you put in a bad night, you and Sam Kane and that sawed-off deputy of his. I'll bet all three of you sat outside that door with your guns in your hands."

Mack shook his head. "You're wrong, Floyd. I was the only one out there, and I was sound asleep."

Burl scowled. "Where's my breakfast?"

"Haven't had my own yet," Mack said. "I just came in to let Clay out."

"Listen," Burl said sharply. "You tell Sam Kane he better get me some grub."

Mack came over to Clay's cell and put a key in the lock. "You'll eat pretty soon," he said to Burl. "Kane's taking you out for breakfast—sort of a going-away present."

"Big-hearted of him," Burl said.

The old jailer grinned at Clay. "Rats keep you awake last night?"

"I guess I'm used to them," Clay said. He walked out into the corridor. "If I don't see you again, Floyd, take it easy."

"Unless you figure on pulling out," Burl said, "you'll see me."

Sam Kane was in the sheriff's office, downstairs. He sat at his desk, saying nothing until Ed Mack left the office.

Clay reached for his tobacco sack. "You made it through the night," he said, "but you haven't got him to Canon City yet."

"We're leaving on the eight o'clock stage."

"Just you and Floyd?"

Kane nodded.

"You'd better take along a couple of good men for guards," Clay said, as he put the cigarette together. "If you don't I've got a hunch you'll never make it."

"I don't need any help," Kane said stubbornly.

Clay rubbed his neck where the blood had dried on it. "All right for me to go now? You haven't got a thing to hold me for."

"Not now I haven't, but it won't be long till I get something. If you want my advice, you'll round up those cows of yours and find another piece of grass a long way from Marinoot, clear out of my county."

Clay shook his head. "I like it out there on the creek."

They looked at each other for a time, then Kane spoke again in a low tone. "I know how it is with you, Gannon. You've been a hell-raiser all your life, not much different from Floyd Burl until you started getting worked up over Jean Randall."

"Is there anything you don't know, Sheriff?"

"Not much that goes on in this town. You've been sneaking around in the dark, but her old man will catch on before long and then your little romance will be blown sky high."

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you?"

Kane nodded slowly. "Jean never knew a man like you, and she's having her fun. But if you think she's going to leave her father and that big house to go live on a two-bit ranch, you're crazy."

"If you're through telling me how it is," Clay said, "I'd like to get to the barber shop and wash up."

"I just wanted to set you straight," Kane said, getting to his feet. "Of course you won't listen to me, because you've got yourself believing you'll straighten up and show Randall you're going to amount to something, and then everything will be rosy."

CLAY turned and started for the door.

"Just one more thing," Kane said. "While I'm gone to Canon City Ben Poe will be here, and I'm leaving Ben orders to see that you toe the line."

Clay said, "You don't get much out of life, do you, Sheriff?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Kane said.

Troubled by some of what the sheriff had said, Clay left the courthouse. Why had Kane put him in the same class with Floyd Burl? Sure, he had been a little wild, but he didn't have Burl's meanness. But maybe Sam Kane was right, that just a thin line was keeping him from being like Floyd, and it would be easy to step on the wrong side of that line.

He passed people and was aware of their uneasiness, of the way they kept looking at the courthouse. Sam Kane was the only one who wasn't worried. Could a man have that much confidence in himself?

Roy Dexter was standing on the porch of Tuggle's store when Clay turned in.

"Hear they threw you in the jug last night," Dexter said, grinning.

"From what I heard," Roy said, "it must have been a humdinger of a fight."

"Not much different from a lot of scraps we had when we were knocking around together."

Roy laughed and shook his head. "Sometimes I kind of miss those times, Clay."

"Yeah, but you used your head when you married Helen."

Roy nodded soberly. "She's the best thing that ever happened to me." He glanced along the street. "I never saw everybody so worked up before."

"They're wondering if Al and Pinto are going to show up before Kane gets Floyd out of town. It wouldn't surprise me if they did."

"Me either," Dexter said. "There was a time when I'd have stuck around to watch the fun, but not any more."

Clay said idly, "Who all was on the jury?"

Dexter named them off on his fingers—eleven townsmen and one rancher. "It's not hard to spot them," he said, "Just look for the ones that are the most jumpy." He started down the walk, then swung back, saying. "Watch out for Turk Hester, Clay. He'll let something like that stick in his craw."

Clay nodded and went on into the store.

Oliver Tuggle was standing at the window, watching the street. A fat, slow-moving man, he turned around and Clay saw perspiration on his upper lip.

"I need some clothes," Clay said. "A shirt and a pair of pants."

AS CLAY selected a shirt, Tuggle kept glancing toward the street.

"I hear you were on the jury," Clay said. "You're not worried, are you?"

Tuggle glared, but said nothing.

With the new clothes under his arm, Clay left the store and crossed the street to Joe Shire's barber shop. Shire was standing in the doorway, looking toward the courthouse. Following his gaze, Clay saw Sam Kane and Ben Poe coming down the street with Floyd Burl between them. Burl was handcuffed, but he walked with his head up and there was a hard set to his face.

Ben Poe was carrying a rifle. When Kane turned in at a café Poe stayed outside, watching the street.

"Floyd'll be gone in a little while," Clay said to Shire. "Then maybe you boys that were on the jury can stop worrying."

"I won't rest easy," Shire said, "until I hear he's locked up down there at Canon City."

"I want a bath, Joe, and I was figuring on getting a shave. But, seeing the shape you're in, I think I'd better shave myself."

"As far as I'm concerned," Shire said, "you can take your business somewhere else. I haven't forgotten the time you started that fight in here and broke my mirror."

"I paid for it, didn't I?"

"Yes, but it was two months before I could get another one."

Clay felt better when he left the barber shop. The bath and the clean clothes helped a lot. He saw everyone was looking at the café. A stagecoach had pulled up and Sam Kane and Floyd Burl were getting into it. Ben Poe, holding the rifle, nodded to the driver. Brown dust dripped from the big wheels as the stage got under way. The driver was standing up, cracking his long whip over the team, and the town was holding its breath. As Clay walked on toward the hotel it occurred to him that everyone else stood motionless, watching the stage until was out of sight.

When Clay passed Ben Poe, and he heard the deputy say, "I told you Al and Pinto wouldn't show up again—not after the way I ran them out of town last night."

"They could be waiting along the trail, Ben," someone pointed out.

"Naw," Ben said, "we won't see that bunch again."

Clay turned in at the hotel dining room, where a single customer was sitting at a corner table. Valla served the best meals in town, but she didn't do much business. He frowned, remembering again the ugly rumors.

He sat down at a table and presently Valla came in, wearing a plain blue dress with an apron tied around her waist. She had nice eyes and hair, he thought, and she looked too young to have a daughter the age of Mike.

HE SAID, "Morning, Valla."

"Morning, Clay."

"What are the chances of a hungry man getting breakfast?"

"Chances are good," she said. "So you spent the night in jail?" A trace of worry was in her eyes. "They brought Hester here and got him a room for the night. He didn't say two words, but I could see he was thinking plenty."

"He'll forget it when he wakes up."

"Don't be too sure," Valla said. "You

marked him up so he's going to remember. He carries a gun, Clay, and knows how to use it."

He smiled at her. "Stop trying to scare me into losing my appetite."

Valla sighed. "Do you ever worry about anything?"

"Sometimes."

She stood looking down at him for a moment. Then she said in a quiet tone, "Why didn't you let it pass, Clay?"

"Let what pass?"

"Whatever it was that Hester said about me."

"Now what gave you the idea he was talking about you?"

"I know what he's been saying ever since I ran him out of here one night with a butcher knife."

"I wish I could have seen that," Clay said, grinning.

Valla said soberly, "I've had so many things said about me that a few more don't make any difference."

In earnest now, he looked at her. "Why do you stay and take it?"

"I have a business here."

"You could sell out and start somewhere else."

Her face was turned away from him, her expression one he couldn't read. "Maybe I'm hoping that some day I can live down the McCord name. I'm not sure, Clay." She smiled then, and changed the subject. "This isn't getting your breakfast."

"You can bring me some coffee," he said, "while I'm waiting for the ham and eggs." When she started for the kitchen, he called, "How's Mike?"

"Fine. She ought to be down in a little while."

His thoughts went to Jean, and he remembered that what Sam Kane had told him was almost the same thing Emmett had said before he'd left for town. He had thought about it himself, but he didn't want to believe that not being her kind would make any difference.

Sneaking around in the dark had bothered him from the first, but he had let Jean convince him this was the only way they could be together. But now he had to know for sure how she felt.

This morning, he decided, he'd walk right up to that big house, whether she liked it or not—and to hell with what old man Randall said.

Michelle came downstairs, calling his name as soon as she entered the dining room. Clay got up and, when she ran forward, caught her and lifted her high, laughing.

"How's my best girl this morning?"

Michelle's face was shining. She put her arms around his neck and hugged him. "I stayed awake real late last night," she said, "because I thought you'd come to see me."

"I meant to, but I just couldn't make it, Mike."

Valla came in, carrying a platter of ham and eggs.

"Mike's just in time to have breakfast with me," Clay said.

Michelle looked at the platter. "I want whatever Clay's having, Mommy."

"I'll see what I can do about it," Valla said, smiling.

WHEN she started back to the kitchen, Michelle called, "And I'll have coffee, too."

"I think milk would be better for you."

"Clay's not drinking milk."

Clay grinned. "Bring her a little coffee. Won't hurt her."

"You're a big help," Valla said, and went on to the kitchen.

Clay pulled another chair up close to his, asking, "Been fishing lately?"

"Went last week, and I caught a great big one, too. They're biting pretty good this year."

"That old creek out by my place," Clay said, "is just full of fish. You should have seen the one Emmett got the other day."

Michelle's eyes were very bright. "I know a good spot, and it's not far from here, either. Maybe after breakfast you and me could go together."

"I'd like to, Mike, but I've got some business to take care of first."

"Will you be very long?"

"Well, I don't know. But we'll go one of these days, and maybe we could have your mom fix us up a lunch and we'll stay all day. How would you like that?"

Michelle clapped her hands.

Clay said, "I want to take you out and show you the ranch, too. Been building a new corral and fixing things up so you won't know the place."

"I'll bet it would be fun living on a ranch."

"It gets kind of lonesome sometimes."

"Is that why you used to come to town so much?"

Clay reached for a biscuit. "I guess maybe it is," he said, thinking of the years he had wasted after his folks died, the way he had let the ranch run down, when he could have built it into a money-making outfit. He still could, but he had fooled around too long, not caring about much except a good time.

The last two months had been different, but only because of Jean. Was it because he loved her so much that he was trying to change, trying to be something he wasn't cut out for? Sam Kane didn't think a man ever changed. Maybe the sheriff was right.

When Valla had brought Michelle's breakfast, she left to wait on a customer at a corner table. Clay saw her stop and look out the front window, and he detected a trace of uneasiness in her glance.

She's wondering along with everybody else, he guessed. She's thinking, will the Burls come back and, if they do, how can Ben Poe stop them?

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

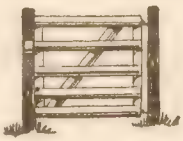
1. What well known cow county in New Mexico in the 1880's, embracing 27,000 square miles, was the largest county in the U.S. at that time?

2. Which was Pat Garrett's middle name: Boyd, Cloyd, Floyd or Lloyd?

3. Pinky Gist, Blue Gentry, Buff Brady, Jeff Green, Booger Red Privett, Red Sublett and BeeHo Gray were all outlaws, Texas Rangers, rodeo hands or trail drivers?

4. Bill Burchardt, whose good stories you read in RANCH ROMANCES, lives in Midwest City not far from the Kickapoo, Pottawatomie and Shawnee Indian Reservations—in what state?

5. Virginia-born Richens Lacy Wootton was one of Kit Carson's Mountain Men, later famous for his Toll Road in Raton Pass. By what nickname was he commonly known?



6. Oldtime cattlemen often closed the gap across a rimrocked canyon to form a pasture without fence. With what word familiar in politics did they name such a pasture?

7. What would you do with a yakima: eat it, drink it, ride it or wear it?

8. Oliver M. Lee was well known as an enemy of Sheriff Pat Garrett. I once served in the Legislature with Lee in his home state. You name the state.

9. What were some oldtime cowboy slang terms for the ranch residence?

10. There is a Santa Rosa in New Mexico and one in California. Which was the outlaw Black Bart's "stomping ground?"

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 100. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

They came out of the darkness, racing for the barricade

BLOOD DREAM

By Herbert D. Kastle

MATT REARDON was thrown out of the Golden Dipper. He lurched across the boardwalk, fell off the edge to the road, and squatted ludicrously in the dust. Moonlight touched his face as he raised it to Tim Burke, who stood outlined between the batwings.

"I repeat," Tim Burke stated coldly, "get out and stay out."

The chill tones of finality made Matt Reardon peer through the darkness, searching for his friend's eyes. "You don't really mean that, Tim?"

"Yes," Tim Burke said. "I've given you room and board and liquor for six months. That's just about six months too long, since

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THEY WERE at the mercy of the Indians . . . a woman, a baby, and a man who drank to forget his terror of the Apache raiders

you never earned a cent of it. And since this is the only bar in Devil's Tooth, I guess you can forget about liquor."

Matt Reardon let the words sink in. He began to get the shakes just from thinking about going more than an hour without a whisky. If the memories of the massacre came back—

"If you want another drink," Burke added, "you'll have to walk eighty miles to Fort Davis for it."

Matt saw the men crowding up behind Tim Burke—curious patrons wondering what was keeping the owner-bartender so long. He knew they were looking at him, and yet he couldn't help what happened. His strong chin began to quiver, and his eyes filled with burning tears.

"Tim, please," he choked, "you know I spent all my money long ago. You know I can't do without liquor."

Suddenly, Tim Burke was shouting. "Look at yourself! Thirty-two years old, big and strong, but so beaten by whisky in six months that you're sitting in the dirt and crying!" He swung to the group of spectators, his voice thickening. "Just take a look at him. Matt Reardon, drunken tramp! You wouldn't think that when he came here he was the toughest—"

"That's enough," Matt said, and something in his voice made Tim Burke fall silent. Matt struggled to his feet and took dead aim on the lantern swinging over Pearsall's Livery at the northern edge of town. He was so drunk he could hardly walk, but he knew that Tim and the others were watching him, so he kept going. Finally he heard a mutter of voices, and light danced on the street a few times. He turned his head.

They were gone, and he was alone on the town's midnight streets. He'd been shocked by Tim's outburst. The truth hurt—it hurt like hell. But, without liquor, how could he forget the horror of that night? How could he erase the blood dream of Cora and Little Matt lying mutilated—

He stopped it right there. He shut it out easily enough because, with this much liquor in him, he could shut out anything. But he still felt dread of what would happen when he began to sober.

HE JAMMED his hands into his pockets. Empty. Tim Burke had thrown him out of Devil's Tooth—thrown him out forever, because Matt Reardon's last remaining spark of pride had been touched. So there was only one thing to do: steal a horse and ride the eighty miles to Fort Davis.

Of course, once he did that he was really finished. They hung horse thieves in Texas, or, at the least, stuck them away at hard labor for ten or twelve years. But they had to catch him first . . .

Then he was lurching under the lantern, peering in the open door of the livery. "Hey, Pearsall!" he called. There was no answer. Matt walked into the livery barn and discovered he was alone. He stumbled to the first stall and saw a tall piebald gelding, saddled and ready to go. Pearsall had evidently readied a horse for someone in town, and then left to call the man.

They might walk in at any moment, Matt realized, and so he led the piebald out of the stall and into the yard. After several abortive attempts, he climbed into the saddle. Once there, he felt better. Drunk or sober, he could ride any cayuse in the Big Bend.

He heeled his mount and put him into a gallop. Ten minutes later the town was out of sight, and he was following the Fort Davis stage trail out into the vast immensity of the Big Bend. He drew up and looked around.

Fear swept in until it was a living thing. The darkness whispered, and he strained to hear what he dreaded most in this world.

The screech of Apache war cries didn't come, but still he struggled with himself, fighting the panic, repeating to himself what the officer from Fort Davis had said in the Golden Dipper only a week ago.

"Geronimo and his tribe are on their way to a Florida reservation. A few of the devils are scattered in old Mexico, but there's no fight left in them." The captain had raised his glass. "Well, boys, I don't think we'll ever see another Indian raid in Texas."

Slowly, Matt's panic receded. Then the thought of broncho Apaches crept into his mind—renegade Indians, lone wolves or small packs, out for booty and scalps against the dictates of their own chiefs.

He suddenly remembered that he wasn't

armed. A second later he sighed in relief, having discovered that there was a rifle stuck in the saddle-holster—one of the new multi-shot types. He checked the weapon, saw it was loaded and that there were two boxes of cartridges in the saddle bags. His mouth twisted into a wry grin as he saw, too, the sack of gold coins—over a hundred dollars, judging by weight. Now he was complete as a thief—horse, rifle and gold. Pearsall and his customer were sure going to want his neck stretched!

He shrugged and set out again, driving his piebald hard. Some time later, he glanced up at the unclouded sky and calculated that it was about two o'clock. His head was beginning to clear. His mouth was dry, his hands trembled on the reins, his stomach quivered uneasily. It looked as if he'd soon be in a state close to complete sobriety, for the first time in six months. And he wouldn't reach Fort Davis until sunrise or later.

So the blood dream began to creep in, and he fought it. He whistled a chorus of Johnny Reb, but then his mouth got too dry for whistling. He hummed a soothing little tune, and then cursed himself as he realized it was the lullaby Cora used to sing to Little Matt. All around him the desert came alive; the wind made sand whispers and they began to sound like voices.

CORA had screamed, "Matt, help me!" And then her voice had reached upward in a screech of agony that tore the night apart. The wail of Little Matt hadn't lasted more than a minute.

It had ended right there for Cora and the child, but it had only begun for Matt. He had been caught in the barn when the attack started, without a weapon, and he had known there was nothing he could do against the fifteen or twenty Apache outside.

But it was more than realizing he was helpless. He had frozen with sudden fear, had burrowed deep in the hay and lain there trembling, while the raiders ran off his horses and smashed his house and butchered his family. The alien terror, the irrational fear of Indians, had taken root then, and it continued to grow in the months that followed.

The Apaches had left as suddenly as they'd appeared, without burning his buildings, and he didn't learn until later that their scouts had spotted a cavalry unit from Fort Davis.

When he finally walked from the barn and entered the house, he'd known that he'd never sleep normally again. He'd stared at the mutilated bodies. He'd talked to them, sat down beside them until the cavalry arrived. That was the way they'd found him—looking at the corpses as if to punish himself for being alive while they lay dead. And even the combat-hardened soldiers had turned their heads away from the red horror that had been Matt Reardon's family.

"Damn," Matt said in a dead voice, as he whipped the piebald into a pounding, shuddering gallop. He wouldn't remember any more! And he wouldn't remember the fear that had settled in his brain later, making him dread the sight of a red man as he had never dreaded anything before.

Just then he heard the sound of running feet, and jerked the piebald to a rearing halt, his heart pounding violently, his right hand reaching for the rifle.

"Hello there," the clear, high voice called. "We're in trouble. Will you help us?"

He saw the shadow detatch itself from the darkness and become a woman. "Thank goodness you came along," she panted. "I was just about going out of my mind." She turned back to the desert, running, then stopped as she failed to hear the sound of Matt's horse. "Why are you sitting there?" she shouted. "Can't you understand that he's sick and I don't know what to do and we're all alone out here?"

"I'll be right behind you," Matt said, realizing that she was hysterical.

She swung around and began to run as fast as she could. He put the horse into a canter and stayed with her. A minute later they came upon a canvas-topped wagon with a team of four horses ground-pegged nearby. From the wagon came a wet, hacking cough.

Matt got down from the piebald and moved to the woman. "You got a lantern, ma'am?"

She nodded. "But Eli told me not to light it. He said Indians might see and come to hurt us. That was three hours ago, the last time he talked." A baby's cry from inside the wagon interrupted her. "Teddy," she ex-

plained. "He's six months old. I wouldn't want anything to happen to him mister. Help us."

Matt found that his knees were weak and his head spinning. "Got something—" he began, and then stopped. He needed a drink, but he just couldn't ask for it now. "Get the lantern," he said.

"But Eli told me—"

"How long have you and Eli been in Big Bend country?"

"Just a few days," she said. "We came all the way from New Jersey. Eli was told he needed Western air for his lungs, so we bought a wagon, and here we are. We were going to find a place to settle."

"There are no more hostiles in these parts," Matt interrupted, the lack of alcohol making his nerves scream. "Now get that lantern or I'll ride straight out of here."

SHE looked as if he'd slapped her in the face, but he didn't care. He had his own problems. The terror was lingering close in the darkness, ready to spring out at him again.

"All right," she said, and moved to the wagon. She got a lantern from under the seat, fiddled with matches, and then had the lantern lit. She held it up, toward Matt, and he was shocked. She was a truly beautiful woman, small-boned, fine-featured, full-bodied without being stout. Her hair was chestnut brown, as Cora's hair had been.

She grew uncomfortable under his stare, and he took the lantern from her. Their hands touched briefly, and he tingled deep inside. She must have read something in his expression, because she turned quickly away.

"Don't get ideas," she said, her voice shaking. "I'm a respectable married woman."

He felt the blood rush to his face. Matt Reardon had hit rock bottom when a woman thought he was going to molest her! But then he remembered how he must look, with a week's growth of beard, dirty shirt and levis, and the most disreputable Stetson this side of the Big Muddy.

"I don't aim to bother you," he said.

She heard the shame and pain in his voice, and swung to face him. "I didn't mean—" She stopped and waved a hand helplessly at the black immensity around them. "I'm lost here," she concluded simply.

He nodded, then stepped up on the wagon and crawled inside, holding the lantern before him. He saw the man lying on piled blankets and bent over him, then moved back when the coughing started. The man coughed for a long time, and when he subsided there were bright flecks of blood on his lips.

Matt didn't bother setting the lantern down. He glanced to the rear, saw the infant in the crib, said, "Hush, baby, hush," as the child cried out. Surprisingly, the infant quieted. Matt left the wagon.

"What do you think?" the woman asked. She didn't wait for an answer. "He's pretty bad, isn't he? His coughing's worse. Maybe the trip was too much for him. What should we do?"

Matt set the lantern on the ground. He squatted next to it, pulled out the makings from his shirt pocket, built himself a smoke. When he lit it, it tasted foul. He ground it into the dust.

"I'm no doctor, ma'am, but your husband looks too sick to be out here. You've got to take him into Fort Davis where the contract surgeon can look him over."

"Yes," she said. "You'll take us there, won't you, mister?"

Matt stared at the ground. "You carrying any whisky?" he asked bluntly.

"Whisky?" she muttered. "You want to give Eli whisky?"

"No." He couldn't say any more, but suddenly thrust out his hands and let her see how they were trembling.

"Oh," she said, her voice small. She went into the wagon, moved things around, and came out with a pint bottle in her hand. He took it, held it against the lantern, saw that it wasn't more than a quarter full.

"Not enough," he said, voice thick. "I'm sorry, but I've got to have more if I'm to spend two-three days herding you to the fort."

"But there isn't any more," she whispered. "Can't you wait?"

His throat burned for a drink, but he set the bottle on the ground and stood up. "No," he said. "But I'll hitch up your team and set you on the trail." He turned away before she could say anything.

IT TOOK him twenty agonizing minutes to do the five-minute job, but finally the wagon was ready to roll. He was moving to his gelding, legs shaky, heart pounding in exhausted spasms, when she said, "You can have the whisky, mister."

He winced at the faint undercurrent of pity and contempt in her voice, but he stopped and looked back to where the pint lay on the ground. Matt shuffled to the bottle, stuck it in his pocket, and returned to his horse. The wagon creaked slowly after him as he swung toward the trail.

When they were on the trail, he stopped and looked back at her. "Just keep going in this direction," he said. "The fort's about sixty miles from here. You can't miss it."

She didn't answer; just sat there, a small, lonely shadow in the primitive desert night. Then she took a deep breath and clucked to her team. The wagon creaked into motion.

Matt dug his heels into the piebald and sent it leaping forward. In no time at all he'd lost the sound of the wagon, and when he glanced over his shoulder he couldn't even see it as a shadow. He kept going at a gallop for a while, then drew to a stop and pulled the pint from his pocket. He tilted back his head, drank until the three or four ounces were gone, then threw the bottle away.

He sat there a moment longer, unconsciously listening for the creak of wagon wheels, and heard nothing. Warmth was beginning to move up through his veins, and he felt a little better.

Then he heard an owl hoot. It brought a sudden wave of panic; the attack on his ranch had been preceded by several such hoots—Indian calls.

He heard a second hoot, and it was from another direction. Quickly, he leaned forward and placed his hand over the piebald's nostrils. The third hoot was way back along the trail, behind the wagon, Matt figured. His panic began to grow, to leap out of the shadows, to reach into his brain with searing fingers. Apaches!

He tensed, thinking frantically. The three hoots had not been circling him. The wagon! He'd almost forgotten it in his terror. That's what they were after! He hadn't been spotted yet. And even if they did spot him, his big gelding could make it to the fort, outdistancing Apache ponies in the long haul.

But even though the black fear was screaming at him to run, he didn't move. There was something else, a memory more recent than his blood dream—the woman and her six-month-old boy.

They had no one to protect them except Eli, who was close to death.

He shook his head. He mustn't think of that. He couldn't be sure there were Apaches in the area. It was just an irrational fear. He hadn't had enough to drink, and so he was imagining things.

He didn't imagine the fourth hoot, nor the faint whinny somewhere off the trail.

He didn't know how it came about. He hadn't intended to go back. What good could one man—and a man sick in the way he was—do against a pack of Apaches? And yet he suddenly heard himself shouting insanely, "Column, fo-ward! Flankers, out!" And he was galloping back along the trail.

BY THEN it was too late to back out, and Matt realized he'd tried to trick the Apaches into flight by making them think a cavalry unit was moving on them. Even as he realized this, he knew it was no good. Even if they did withdraw for a few minutes, they'd come back.

He saw the shadow loom up out of the darkness directly in front of him. He raised his voice, calling, "Woman, stop the team—"

He didn't finish. It was a lone horseman, his face painted white.

Matt dug for the rifle, saw it was too late, heard a surprised grunt as the Apache became aware that Matt wasn't another Indian. Then they were at close quarters, and Matt saw the gleam of metal as a blade rose. He grabbed wildly as he went by, and was holding a wiry wrist in his fingers. He heard another grunt, a choked cry. The wrist in his grip twisted frantically, and then was attached to a great weight.

He kept going, held on to the wrist, looked down and to the right. The Indian had been pulled from his pony and was stumbling along the piebald's side, still holding his knife. Matt reached over with his left hand and pulled the knife loose. He raised it high and plunged it

into the brave's back. There was a choking cough and Matt let go, knowing he'd finished his Indian. He stuck the bloody knife in his belt, not reasoning, just acting.

By then the piebald was racing past a bulky shadow, and Matt realized it was the wagon He swung around, pulling his rifle free of the boot as he shouted, "Woman, stop the wagon! There are Indians around us!"

He slid from his horse, tied it to the front wheel, leaped to the seat. She was sitting there, breathing harshly, frozen in fear. He knocked her backward into the wagon, plunged after her as three distinct shots sounded and the whine of bullets passed close. She still made no sound.

Matt sucked air, then stuck his head out of the wagon. He listened for what seemed to be an eternity, and when he was about to withdraw he heard the owl hoot from up ahead. It was answered from behind the wagon, and from the left, and the right.

They were ringed by Apaches. They were on the stage route, but today was Monday and the stage wouldn't come through until Thursday. Any lone rider, or even two or three, would be just so many added scalps for the raiding party.

That army captain had been wrong; there were still hostiles in Texas. Maybe it was Juh who had come over the border, or old Nana—or perhaps these were broncho Apaches.

The baby began to cry, and the woman crawled to the crib and hushed it.

"Woman," Matt said, "I've got to kill your horses. We'll use the flesh as a barricade."

"You said there were no Indians," she whispered. "You said I could light the lantern."

"I was wrong," he said, and leaped outside, onto the seat, down to the trail. He ran to the front horses and shot them at point-blank range. The rear team bucked and screamed, but he didn't grab the braces, figuring they wouldn't be able to move much more than a few feet with the dead weight of the lead team. He was right. They backed up in their terror, leaving enough space between themselves and the lead team to provide protection for several people.

When all four were down he sprinted back to the wagon, marveling that an arrow or bullet hadn't found his body by this time. Just as the thought was completed, he heard the whine of lead and the solid plunk as it hit flesh, and he saw that he was too late to reach his piebald. The saddle horse fell forward as its front legs collapsed, and it screamed like a human being.

MATT figured he'd better get those two boxes of ammunition before the piebald fell over. He managed to open the saddlebags and find one box but, before he could fumble out the other, something hit his thigh and went right on through. He sat down in the dust, biting his lip to keep from crying out. As he reached again for the saddlebags the piebald toppled over, and Matt had to squirm back to avoid being pinned. He hesitated only a second, then realized he could never get at that second box of ammunition with his leg shot and those devils pouring lead all around him.

He tried to get up, failed, tried again and made it. He hobbled to the seat, struggled up on it, and fell into the wagon.

"Woman," he gasped, "get your child and follow me. I'm going to take your husband—" He paused as a wave of weakness hit him, then sucked air and gathered his strength. This was no time to falter. There was lead flying through the canvas, and it was pure luck that no one had been hit inside the wagon. "I'm going to take your husband," he continued. "and carry him outside."

"Why don't we stay here?" she asked. "Isn't it safer?"

"Do as I say!" Matt snapped. "This wagon will burn like a torch."

He bent to the man, began to slid his hands under the quiet form, stopped. A flash of light penetrated the wagon, flickered, strengthened, began to flame. Three more fire arrows followed in quick succession.

The woman cried out. Matt moved toward her, crouching under the flames that were beginning to eat the canvas top. He pushed her to the opening, heard the child in her arms cough fitfully, and helped her out on the seat. Then he saw the Chiricahua brave galloping forward, a lance held rigidly before him. The flint tip of that lance was only a few feet

away when Matt swung up his rifle and squeezed off a shot. The Apache hiccuped loudly, fell to the ground, and lay still. His pony raced away, terrified by the flames licking at the wagon top.

"Now," Matt said, and began to move. Somehow he got the woman down, pulled her to the dead horses, shoved her over their still-warm bodies into the little space between the two teams.

As he lay panting, trying to gather strength for the next task, the woman finally noticed that her husband wasn't with them. "You've left Eli in the wagon," she screamed. "We've got to get him!"

When Matt shook his head and swallowed dryly, unable to speak, she placed the child on the ground and made as if to climb over the barricade.

Matt stopped her. "Dead," he gasped. "He was dead when I touched him."

She tried to shake off his hand. "How could you be sure?" she asked, and there was hatred in her voice. "He wasn't dead ten minutes ago. He wouldn't be cold." She twisted frantically. "You left him there to burn alive, you rotten drunkard!"

Matt cursed thickly, got up, limped stiffly over the barricade. He was upright, uncaring, unthinking. He had left the rifle with the woman, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Fire was beginning to nibble at the wooden body as he reached the wagon. He climbed inside, felt heat singe his scalp, grabbed Eli by the leg and hauled him outside. He left the body on the ground and took the Apache knife from his belt.

Hoofbeats pounded up behind him, but he merely shrugged and continued with his task. He had to cut the braces and free the wagon of the dead team. Then he had to push the wagon about fifteen or twenty feet from the barricade so that, when it really began to burn, the woman and her child wouldn't be roasted alive. He set about doing this.

HE HEARD the shots, and a shrill scream. He didn't turn, even though some slight wonder touched his brain that the woman had actually hit a fast-moving target. He was starting to shove the wagon, and it was a job that required all his attention.

His right leg kept buckling under him, but the wagon was beginning to roll. With a mild sense of pleasure, he let it go and saw it continue a good five feet past the twenty he'd set as his goal. He turned and began limping back to the barricade, but he remembered Eli and stopped to drag him along.

"Get down," the woman shouted. "Mister, please get down!"

He paid no attention, but he did pause when he passed the body of the Indian she'd shot—a short, gaunt brave with a neat hole in his chest.

Then he looked up and saw them staring at him—eight mounted braves at the edge of the circle of flickering light cast by the burning wagon. He stared back, and suddenly thought he must be insane. He'd been walking around as if at a church picnic, and the warriors were fascinated by him. They'd never seen anyone strolling through death this way. It was enough to make them forget their initial purpose—for a moment.

The moment ended as Matt dropped flat in the dust, reaching for the old single-action rifle lying near the dead brave. With shrill screams, the mounted warriors raised their weapons and fired. Their ponies were moving, so they were all pretty far off target. But Matt was on level ground and his shot, squeezed off with a prayer that the old rifle was loaded, sent an Apache pitching backward from his mount.

"It's empty," the woman shouted. "Mister, I can't help you. The gun's empty!"

He fervently hoped none of the attackers understood English, and the next moment was reassured that they didn't. They wheeled into the darkness to reload their one-shot rifles, and he made it back to the horse-flesh barricade, leaving the old rifle behind but dragging Eli along.

He left Eli outside the barricade and threw himself into the space beside the woman. Wordlessly, he pointed at Eli. She leaned forward, and while she examined her husband Matt took out the box of shells and reloaded the rifle. He finished and sighed wearily. He

had twenty-four rounds, including those in the rifle. It wasn't much.

The baby was crying again and the woman moved to him. Matt turned away as she unbuttoned the top of her dress. He watched the wagon burn steadily, as the heavy wooden frame gave strong fuel. It would take a hundred gallons of water, he mused, to put out that giant torch.

"Water," he muttered. "We've got no water."

He didn't even realize he'd spoken aloud until the woman said, "Nor food. Nor anything but that rifle and those few shells I saw you handling. There was a rifle in the wagon, and about a hundred shells too. There was a big barrel of water and plenty of provisions."

He glanced at her, saw she'd buttoned her dress and was rocking the baby to sleep. "We had no time," he muttered.

She didn't answer. Matt examined the lighted area around them, and wondered what the Apaches were doing. Maybe they'd lost heart for this night fighting. Maybe they had already left.

Then they came out of the darkness, on all sides, racing for the barricade. Bullets whined overhead, but those that were low enough to do any damage were stopped by the hundreds of pounds of solid horseflesh. Matt began to fire, shouting at the woman to lie flat, and he worked the lever of the weapon as fast as he could. He didn't have time to pick difficult targets; he tried for the ponies.

IT ENDED as quickly as it had begun. Four ponies lay dead, one kicked feebly, and a crippled Apache was trying to crawl away. The other unhorsed braves had managed to sprint back to the covering darkness.

Matt finished off pony and Indian with two careful shots, then leaned back, easing his throbbing leg. In twenty-four hours, he thought, that wound would probably be infected.

He suddenly grinned, thinking that twenty-four hours was a long way off. They might be able to last through the broiling July day, but the next night, without the illumination of a burning wagon, would spell the end.

Suddenly he realized that, though he was frightened, he felt none of the irrational panic of the last six months. He'd met his fear head-on, seen it for what it was, and so defeated it. He'd even given better than he'd taken. And they hadn't finished him yet.

But then he thought of the woman, and it pained him. He didn't want her to die; he didn't want the child to die.

"Mister," the woman said quietly, "I can't tell you how sorry I am for saying those terrible things about you. I saw the bullet in Eli's chest. He must have been hit right at the beginning, when they first shot into the wagon."

"Yes," Matt said. "I felt blood when I put my hands under him. All I had to do was touch that hole to know he was gone."

"He was gone anyway," she said. "I knew in my heart he wouldn't live out the year, and so did he. But we couldn't talk about it, and we hoped for a miracle."

"I understand," Matt said.

"You're an understanding man," she said, and there was deep sincerity in her voice. "I never meant to call you what I did. When you walked to the wagon, standing up—" She breathed harshly. "It wasn't just because I said those things to you that you did it. I know that. You were tired and mixed up and you didn't care for a while. But if you had died, I would have felt I'd killed you. And that would have made my own dying a very hard thing."

He nodded, not really listening to the words, but soothed by the soft, sweet, youthful music of her voice. Her face was touched by the flickering light, and he marveled again at its beauty.

He reached out and took her hand, and saw how she secured the baby in the crook of her left arm. He rubbed her fingers between his own, and thrilled to their delicate mold and surprising softness.

"You wouldn't have stayed a widow long," he said, unconsciously using the past tense. "You're beautiful, and something more than that." His voice had dropped to an exhausted murmur. "I like you, woman. I did right from the very first."

She didn't answer, but allowed her hand

to rest in his. Then she said, "My name is Adele."

"Mine's Matt," he murmured. "Hello, Adele."

She withdrew her hand and began to cry. He said, "I shouldn't have bothered you. I'm sorry."

"No," she said, "it's not that." She closed her eyes, then opened them again. "My Eli was fighting off death for the last year and he didn't have time for much else. Maybe I'm awful, but those things you just said reached deep inside and made me happy. And as soon as I felt happy I remembered Eli, and where we are, and so—"

"Yes," he said. But a second later her hand returned timidly to his. His heart gave a great leap, and they sat there that way. Then he felt exhaustion moving in and said, "I've got to close my eyes for a while. You watch. If anything happens, wake me. I've just got to sleep." He dozed off immediately.

LATER that night she woke him, and he fired at flitting shadows. But the Apaches were not ready for the final assault. They would wait for the right time—the next night, most likely. They were patient, and had plenty of time. When the shadows had slipped away, Matt turned and saw Adele crying softly.

"How much longer?" she choked. "How much longer, Matt?"

He had no answer, no comfort for her. "Get some sleep," he said, his voice harsh.

After she'd settled herself and the infant, she looked at him and said, "Tell me why you drink, Matt."

He reached for tobacco, decided that his throat was too dry for smoke, and shrugged. "It doesn't matter any more."

"Tell me," she insisted.

He told her the whole story. The pain of it came back to him again, but now it was dulled in the normal manner. The sickness of the blood dream was ended.

When he finished, she closed her eyes. By the time her breathing had settled into the shallow rhythms of sleep, gray light was touching the eastern horizon.

The hours went by, and the sun traveled into the sky and hung there. It was noon before the baby's wailing for food roused Adele. Matt was examining the charred remains of the wagon with dull, despairing eyes.

Adele said, "Matt, it's so hot."

He knew she was thinking of water, and there was no water. Without being aware of it, he stroked the rifle's walnut stock. Finally he swallowed dryly, and leaned back against the sun-heated horseflesh. Soon the meat would begin to putrefy. Soon thirst would be a growing agony. And the Apaches would take them in the end.

She'd seen and understood his gesture of stroking the rifle. "When will you do it?" she asked quietly.

He closed his eyes and said, "I'm going to sleep a while. Watch carefully." Then, knowing she was still waiting for an answer, he whispered, "When the sun sets."

He slept heavily and long, but was up at about six o'clock, thirst gripping his throat with dry fingers, filling his mouth with the feel of cotton.

"They moved around a little," Adele said dully. "But they were too far away to hurt us, so I didn't bother you."

He shifted weight, felt something on his leg, and looked down.

"I used some of my petticoat," she said. "I figured you might as well have that wound bandaged."

He moved the limb experimentally. "Feels pretty good," he said, surprise in his voice.

"It isn't a serious wound," she said. "It'll heal all by itself in a few—" She didn't finish, and their eyes met briefly.

"We're not dead yet," he said, suddenly angry. He gripped the rifle, turned over on his stomach, and looked around.

He didn't see any Apaches. They must be waiting for nightfall. They knew they could take the barricade easily then, and they sure must want to. They'd lost four of their number—an amazingly high number of casualties for an Apache band raiding a lone wagon. They would want to exact a painful revenge.

Matt turned to Adele, and wondered that she could still look so beautiful. Impulsively he leaned forward and touched her cheek with his parched lips. She smiled at him, squeezed his hand, then closed her eyes.

THE minutes grew into hours, and the hours pulled the sun inexorably toward the western horizon. The desert took on the reddish-blue hues of sunset, and rich purple tinged the sky. The Apache horsemen drifted out again, and this time they didn't go away. They moved forward, slowly enclosing the barricade, growing from pin-points to human figures, pausing only when Matt lined his sights on one and pulled the trigger. The shot fell short, did nothing except to awaken the baby.

"Hush," Adele said, eyes on the Apaches. "Hush, baby."

Matt twisted his head around in one last desperate search for salvation. He saw nothing but the braves inching their ponies forward, getting as close as possible so that darkness would find them ready for the last assault. Then he moved forward and squeezed in beside Adele, keeping the rifle low at his side.

"Good-by, Matt," she said, and pressed her lips briefly to his. "If we had lived through this, we might—" She turned away, looking out at the rapidly darkening landscape.

The Apaches were dim shadows now, as it grew dark. Then the quiet was torn by shrill screams and the pounding of hoofs racing toward them. Matt raised the rifle.

Suddenly gunshots slashed through the night, and hoarse voices called. Someone shouted, "Don't chase them, dammit! If we split up, they'll cut us to pieces in the darkness. Leave them for the cavalry to catch."

Matt's hands jumped, pointing the rifle skyward. He squeezed off two shots and bellowed. "Here! Over here, you blessed Irishman!"

There was an instant of silence, and then Tim Burke was shouting, "It's Matt Reardon! Hear that, Pearsall? We caught your horsethief!"

Matt was hugging Adele. He realized that this must be the posse from Devil's Tooth, belatedly sent out to catch him, and he knew what they did to horsethieves in Texas. But he didn't care. If they stretched his neck, or took him back and made him break rock for ten years, it didn't matter. Adele and the baby were alive.

Tim Burke was dismounting, vaulting the horseflesh barricade. "Phew!" he said succinctly. "You sure picked yourself one hell—" Then he saw Adele. "A woman!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Matt said. "A wonderful woman. See that she gets title to my ranchhouse and whatever cattle can be rounded up. I never did manage to sell it, or borrow money on it, so remember that it's a dying man's wish."

"Dying man?" Adele asked.

"You know what I mean, Tim," Matt said quietly. "Even if you can make Pearsall turn me over to a lawman, it still goes."

Pearsall answered for himself. "If you think I left that piebald all saddled, with a new rifle in the boot and a hundred and twenty gold clinkers in the saddlebags, you're crazy. The whole thing was a plant. Tim Burke paid most of the tab, and some of your other friends chipped in a mite."

Matt gaped, listened wonderingly while they explained. Tim and some of the others had decided on drastic action to save him from the bottle. Tim had ground his pride into the dust in front of a crowd, and Pearsall had set up a mount. Matt had done exactly as they'd figured he would, and they hoped he would go clear out of the Big Bend, escape his blood dream, and make a new life for himself. They hadn't ridden out here after him, but because a cowpoke had seen Apache sign and heard shots.

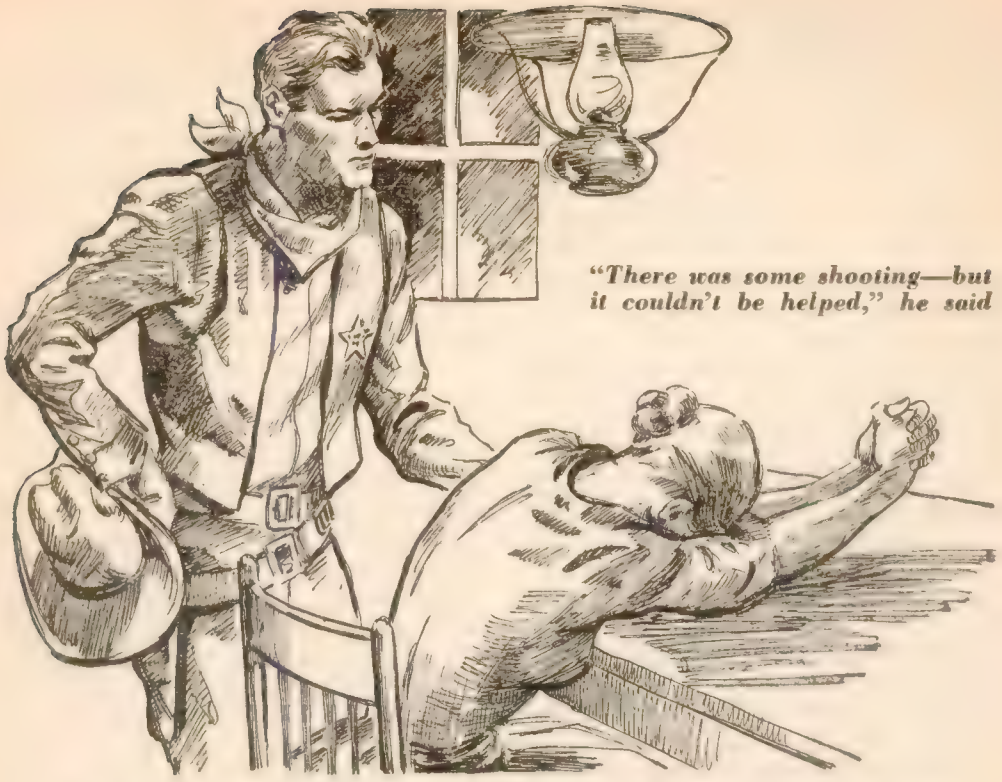
After they'd left the barricade and had some water, Matt told his story. Tim Burke hesitated, then pulled a pint bottle from his pocket.

"You've earned it, Matt. Drink up."

Matt looked at the whisky, and then at Adele. Her eyes slid away. He took the bottle and had himself a short drink. It tasted great, but he didn't seem to want any more. He gave it back and said, "Thanks."

Tim Burke nodded and said, "Guess I just lost a customer, boys."

Matt felt Adele squeeze his hand, and was suddenly sure that they'd find forgetfulness, and happiness, together—he and she and little Teddy.



"There was some shooting—but it couldn't be helped," he said

REPUTATION

By J. L. Bouma

WHEN he took over the town at noon, and before he made his first rounds, Rigsby would look across Wagon Pass's dusty street from his office and see her behind the restaurant counter, waiting on customers. Usually she gave him a little wave and a smile. But that particular day she didn't so much as glance his way, and Rigsby sighed and asked Art Hebb if anything out of the ordinary had happened since midnight.

Hebb yawned and shook his head. "Not a thing." He looked down at Rigsby. "Listen, why don't you take the day off? Why don't you go fishing or something?"

"Stop it, will you?" Rigsby said. "You know I can't do that."

"Why not? I'm not so sleepy that I can't pull your shift. You can take over for me at midnight."

"You mean so I won't be here when this Gil Stark rides through, is that it?"

Hebb grunted. Two farm wagons rumbled by, followed by three riders. The riders

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DAN RIGSBY GOT a badge, and a gun. He had to kill, and then he couldn't stop. . . .

swung down and tied up in front of the last Chance Saloon. There were quite a few people along the street already—women with shopping baskets, farmers, and punchers, and town children on their way home from school for their noon meals.

Rigsby's gaze went again to the restaurant. Then he shrugged and got up. He was a slender man of medium height in brown twill trousers that clung to his whittled hips. His face was young and lean, his eyes clear and alert. He wore the badge of his office pinned to the flap of his left shirt pocket. His heavy gunbelt sagged a little from the holster that was snugged low on his thigh. He brushed the worn grip of the Colt with sensitive fingers, and reached for his hat. Hebb watched him with anxious eyes.

"Dan, you can't do this," he said.

"What're you talking about? I don't aim to do anything except to keep the peace in this town."

"You know what I mean."

"Look," Rigsby said, annoyed. "I'm being paid to keep peace. What's wrong with you, Art? You want me to run every time a two-bit gunfighter sets his sights for me?"

"Not exactly. But you can't keep this up, Dan. First it was this fellow Drago. Three months ago it was Whitey Wilson. And a month later the Bitter Root Kid rode in to try his luck. Today Stark will hit town, and next week or next month it'll be somebody else. You either have to stop it, or one of 'em will stop you."

"I don't even know this Gil Stark, except by reputation," Rigsby said. "Maybe he won't even show."

"He has to because of his reputation, and you know it."

RIGSBY smiled. "What about my reputation?"

"You really mean that, don't you?"

"Oh, hell, I was just funning."

"I'm beginning to think you're serious, and so are a lot of other people. You might not realize it, but you've changed. You used to talk about turning in your badge and buying a little spread. You and Nora were all set to marry. But ever since you shot Drago, you've held to the crazy idea that you have to meet every gunslinger who wants to try your speed. Please quit before it's too late, Dan."

"I plan to," Rigsby said. "But not today."

"You want to end up in the cemetery with Jordan?"

"Jordan got careless," Rigsby said, thinking of the man whose job he had taken over.

"You're turning out to be just like he was before they killed him," Hebb said angrily. "Lonely because he wouldn't trust anyone, and people were afraid of him. He used to sleep with his door locked, and he never left a room without first looking through the window."

"Nothing wrong with that. But I still say he got careless."

"And you never will, I suppose?"

"Not if I can help it." Rigsby opened the door and looked up and down the street.

"Nora's not taking much more of this," Hebb said. "And why should she? You got any idea what it must be like for her?"

"I'm not making her do a thing she doesn't want to do, so just shut up about her."

"You fool, you crazy young fool—" Then Hebb broke off and added in a different voice, "I wish I knew what you're trying to prove."

"Not a thing," Rigsby said. "I'm just doing my job."

He saw Ace Hawkins out in front of his saloon, talking with Dykes, who had tried to get the job as town marshal after Jordan's death. But the city fathers had rejected his appeal, and since then he had taken over the dice game in Ace's Last Chance Saloon.

Those two held Rigsby's attention for a moment before he stepped outside. As he started along the boardwalk, Ace Hawkins said something to Dykes, then came across the street and grinned at Rigsby. He was a short, fleshy man with a round, red face.

"I hear there might be a little trouble today," he said.

"You likely heard it three-four days ago," Rigsby said.

Hawkins nodded. "You know anything about this fellow Stark?"

"No."

Ace Hawkins now leaned against an awning post and glanced along the street. "I heard about him before I ever hit this town. He used to be a sheriff in one of those cow counties down in Texas. Something happened and he started peddling his gun. I understand he had a smooth draw, but that was a good many years ago." He looked up at Rigsby. "What do you think?"

"About what?" Rigsby said.

"I was wondering if he'd show."

"Keep wondering," Rigsby said shortly, and walked on. He hoped he was wrong about what Ace Hawkins had in mind.

He stopped at the corner and looked around before crossing the street. Unlike Jordan, who had always ridden this circuit, Rigsby made his rounds on foot because he figured a man in the saddle offered too big a target. Jordan had been shot out of the saddle one night in an alley, and Rigsby didn't mean to end up the same way.

STOPPING at the edge of town, he looked out over the flat country toward a range of hazy hills, where he meant to run his own cattle. The sun's heat burned through his shirt, and he could smell sage on the light breeze. It was a fine day and he would hate to see it turn bad. A little anger, as well as a measure of doubt, stirred in him as he started back down the opposite side of the street—anger because, as a law officer and as a man, he could do nothing but face what lay ahead; doubt, because of what Art Hebb had said.

"You're turning out to be just like Jordan before they killed him. You might not realize it, but you've changed."

Was it true? He guessed it was, and he would just be lying to himself if he denied it. He turned up Elk Street and tramped toward the alley.

A number of wagons were parked on the field next to the feed store, and a bunch of farmers squatted on their heels in the shade of the barn-like building. He could feel their eyes on him as he approached. They likely had more work than they could handle at home, he thought bitterly, but at a time like this they came to town. It took a hanging or a gunfight to bring them.

He was walking on by when he saw Dykes, with three men around him, standing out back of the store. They were passing something back and forth. Just then one of them looked up, saw Rigsby, said something, and walked quickly away.

Dykes turned and stared impassively at Rigsby. He was a bulky man with high shoulders and a thick black mustache. "Well, if it isn't the marshal," he said, and shoved his hand in his pocket, but not before Rigsby glimpsed a roll of bills.

"What kind of odds are you giving, Dykes?" Rigsby's voice was softly vicious; a wild anger crowded him.

Dykes said mildly, "What're you talking about, Marshal?"

"If there were a law against gambling I'd run you in," Rigsby said, and watched a smile touch the corners of Dykes's mouth.

He studied Rigsby carefully through a poised moment of silence, then said, "You wouldn't be getting nervous, would you?"

Rigsby remained silent. He took a long breath and got himself under control. He looked at the other two men, who backed away, then returned his gaze to Dykes. "All right, you can make your bets and go to hell. And you probably will unless you bet on the right man. Think that over."

He turned away, but Dykes came up to him quickly and grasped his elbow. He said in a rough voice, "What do you mean?"

"Keep your hands off me," Rigsby said, and slashed Dykes in the mouth with his fist.

The blow didn't hurt Dykes, but he stepped back just the same, the beginning of fear in his eyes. Rigsby noticed that the other man kept his hand well away from his holstered gun. It disgusted the marshal, and he turned away a second time, feeling suddenly lonely.

He would liked to spend a half hour talking crops and cattle with the farmers, the way he used to, but now that was out. Men were wary of him, perhaps afraid. Even Dykes, who had almost forgotten himself just now, and who had a little reputation of his own, had suddenly remembered what had happened to Drago and Whitey Wilson and the Bitter Root Kid. It was a hell of a note that, once you killed, even in self-defense, you were a marked man.

RIGSBY opened the back door of the restaurant and stepped inside. There was no one here except the Chinese cook, who looked at the marshal and bobbed his head. Then Nora Pedersen came in with a stack of dishes, which she put in the big wooden washtub. Rigsby watched her. She was a blond girl of nineteen, who looked back at him with a cold and indifferent expression around her eyes and her mouth.

"Well," he said softly, "I promised to stop by, so here I am."

"Do you want anything to eat?"

He shook his head.

"Then there wasn't much point in stopping by, was there?" she said. "We went over it pretty thoroughly last night, and there's no point in going all through it again."

Steam rose from the spout of a copper kettle on the stove. Out front, a customer laughed, and a door slammed shut.

Rigsby said softly, "Then it's quits, is that it?"

She did not answer.

"You think, like Art, that I enjoy this?" He took a deep breath. "You think I'm glad this fellow Stark is coming here?"

"Not exactly."

"I only took the job in the first place because it pays more than I could make punching cattle."

"I know that," she said. "But it's kind of got hold of you already. And as I said last night, you can't have that and have me, too."

"So you want me to turn in my badge and hang up my gun, is that it?"

"Not for my sake as much as yours."

"That's nice," he murmured.

"Oh, Danny—" Someone out front called her name. She looked at him a second longer, then turned away, her eyes tragic.

Rigsby went out then and stood in the afternoon heat, feeling sick and discouraged. He started back to his office, thinking it was best it end this way. At least she hadn't tried to talk him into making a promise he might not be able to keep; that was one of the things he admired about her.

As he entered his office, he hoped Gil Stark had changed his mind about coming to Wagon Pass. Maybe he had. Or maybe the rumor about his coming had no basis in fact. It was hard to tell how that kind of rumor got started.

The lowering sun put a crimson glow on the window now, and Rigsby remembered it had been this time of day when Drago had hit town and had made trouble in one of the saloons. A brutal man with an animal-like cunning, he had shot a row of bottles off the back bar, and had run everyone else out. Rigsby hadn't wanted any trouble with him, so he had told Drago to pay the damages and leave town. Drago had laughed and said what he thought of cow-town marshal, and Rigsby told him to unbuckle his gunbelt and come along to jail.

He had sensed then what was going to happen. Drago had made as though to unbuckle his gunbelt, but instead he had gone for his gun. He'd been fast, very fast, but when the smoke cleared it turned out that he hadn't been quite fast enough.

That was when Rigsby had first noticed the difference in the way men looked at him, the first time he and Nora had quarreled.

WHEN the word spread that Whitey Wilson was coming to Wagon Pass, folks weren't surprised, for the rumor was that Wilson and Drago had been friends. Rigsby remembered Wilson's crossing the street toward him, and calling out an insulting remark before going for his gun.

As it turned out, Wilson hadn't been fast enough either.

The Bitter Root Kid had been a cat of a different breed, a sneaky youngster with a low-slung gun out to make himself a reputation. He had tried for Rigsby in an alley, and had been carried out feet first.

Something like that got talked about, of course. Stage drivers passed the word; newspapers mentioned the marshal at Wagon Pass. And now the dismal knowledge came to Rigsby that Art Hebb had spoken another truth. After today, after Gil Stark, it would be someone else; and a man couldn't be the fastest draw all the time.

As Rigsby rose to go out again, Art Hebb opened the door and stepped inside. "Stark is over at the Last Chance, and he's been doing a little talking. What're you going to do about it?"

Rigsby looked at the deputy. "I better hear what he has to say."

"Dan," Hebb said, "it's not too late to back out. Do you know there's been a lot of betting going on?"

"I guessed as much."

"The odds are two to one in Stark's favor."

Rigsby felt a sense of outrage that some men would try to make money out of something like this. He gripped the butt of his

Colt, then rubbed his hand along his thigh. "Two to one, eh?"

Hebb said brutally, "What's wrong? Are your feelings hurt?"

Rigsby looked straight at him and considered this shortly. "No, Art," he said, "my feelings aren't hurt." He picked up his hat and went out.

The boardwalks weren't exactly crowded, but most of the doorways were filled, and faces looked out of windows. His sense of outrage increased as he crossed over to the Last Chance, being careful not to look toward the restaurant. And then he forgot Nora through wondering what had brought Gil Stark here to Wagon Pass. Was it because the man wanted to add to his reputation?

The windows of the Last Chance glittered with the last sunlight, and Rigsby slowed his steps and lowered his head a little. Gil Stark would have the comparative darkness of the saloon in his favor as Rigsby entered, which made it a bad proposition. Still, the man would probably not open fire without warning.

Rigsby shouldered through the batwings and saw the lone man at the bar. There was no sign of a bartender. Then he saw Ace Hawkins and Dykes at the back of the room, and heard Hawkins say in a mocking voice, "Why, hello, Marshal. How's it going?"

There was something here that nudged the edge of Rigsby's mind, but he could not quite understand it. He paced along the bar and stopped three feet from Gil Stark. At first he saw only a slender man with a long, bony face that appeared older than he'd pictured it.

He murmured, "You Gil Stark?"

"Yeah," the man said, "I'm Stark."

"Hear you're looking for me."

"That's right."

"Why?"

Stark did not answer directly, and now Rigsby had a better look at him and saw the carved lines alongside Stark's mouth, and the eyes that were pale and somehow filmed with a remote sadness.

"Heard about you," Stark said softly. "Thought I'd find out if it were true."

FROM the corner of his eye Rigsby looked past Stark's shoulder at Ace Hawkins and Dykes. The two men had come forward a little, as though wanting to hear this conversation. Rigsby looked again into Stark's eyes.

Rigsby said softly, "If Whitey Wilson or the Bitter Root Kid had given me that reason for wanting to meet me, I'd have believed them."

"You don't believe me?" Stark's gaze had narrowed a little, and now his elbow moved slowly from the edge of the bar. This could be the moment, Rigsby thought.

"You don't look like the kind of man who wants to carve another notch on his gun," he said carefully.

A cold little smile touched Stark's mouth. "Is that how it will end?" The smile was still there around his mouth, but the voice held a sort of regret that puzzled Rigsby. He glanced again at Ace Hawkins, and saw a smug smile on the fat little man's face. Then he knew.

He murmured, "It must be a hell of a way to make a living."

Stark considered him gravely, as though he were really looking at him for the first time. "I agree," he said.

Rigsby nodded and said quietly, "Do you figure to earn your pay?"

"Ah," Stark breathed. "Don't make it difficult for me, Marshal."

Rigsby sighed, an emptiness within him. "It is a bad thing when men profit through a man's death," he said softly. "No, Stark, I'll not make it difficult for you, because I don't intend to go through with this business. I'm turning my back on you and walking out of here, and that will be the end of it."

He looked deliberately at Ace Hawkins and Dykes, and then turned away, aware of an itching sensation between his shoulder blades. But it was gone before he reached the batwings, for he sensed that Stark would not shoot him in the back.

He heard Ace Hawkins say something in a low, rough voice, and this made him jump to one side and turn as a shot roared in the room. Something flamed along his ribs, and his own gun leaped into his hand. There was a second shot, and he saw Ace Hawkins slump to the floor. Stark, his back against the bar, had a smoking gun in his hand and was turning to Dykes, who had just made his draw.

That was when Rigsby fired. At the shot, Dykes screamed and clutched a shattered elbow, and the gun fell from his fingers.

Rigsby turned to Gil Stark, and for a moment these two men studied each other. Then Stark said quietly, "I never could stand to see a man shoot another in the back."

"Which makes this my lucky day," Rigsby said, and smiled.

Stark holstered his gun. "As you remarked a while ago, this is a hell of a way to make a living. But it's hard for a man to stop once he gets started. And it doesn't matter much whether he wears a badge or not, though it is better when he does wear one."

"Mine will be available as of tomorrow," Rigsby said. "I'm quitting this business."

Stark shook his head. He murmured, "This town is not far enough away. Maybe there is no place far enough, unless a man quits packing a gun entirely. Even Hawkins found me and made me an offer, you see."

"I figured that was your reason for coming here."

Stark smiled his sad smile. "In time it could have happened to you. A man loses his friends and is alone, and then nothing much matters." He sighed and said, "Luck to you, Rigsby. I feel very good about this." He shouldered through the men who were crowding inside the saloon.

ART HEBB came up and said, "Good Lord, I thought—"

"It's all right, Art."

"You'd better go see Nora," Hebb said.

"Sure," Rigsby said, and told quickly what had happened.

Then he went out and along the street, and this time he entered the restaurant by the front door. The place was empty. Rigsby went around behind the counter to the kitchen. She was sitting at the little table, her head in her arms. He came up behind her.

"Well, it turned out all right," he said softly. "There was some shooting, but it couldn't be helped."

"Are you all right?"

"Hawkins tried to shoot me in the back, but all he did was nick me. He hired Stark to come here, but Stark turned out to be a good man. He shot Hawkins."

"There'll be someone else," she said.

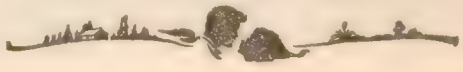
Rigsby said softly, "It wouldn't have been quits, would it?"

"I guess not."

"Well, it doesn't make any difference now," Rigsby said. "I've held this job long enough."

She rose slowly and stared at him, then gave a sobbing cry and threw herself into his arms. "Oh, Danny, Danny! I was so afraid, not only for you but for myself. I was afraid I couldn't stand it much longer."

"You won't have to now," Rigsby said.



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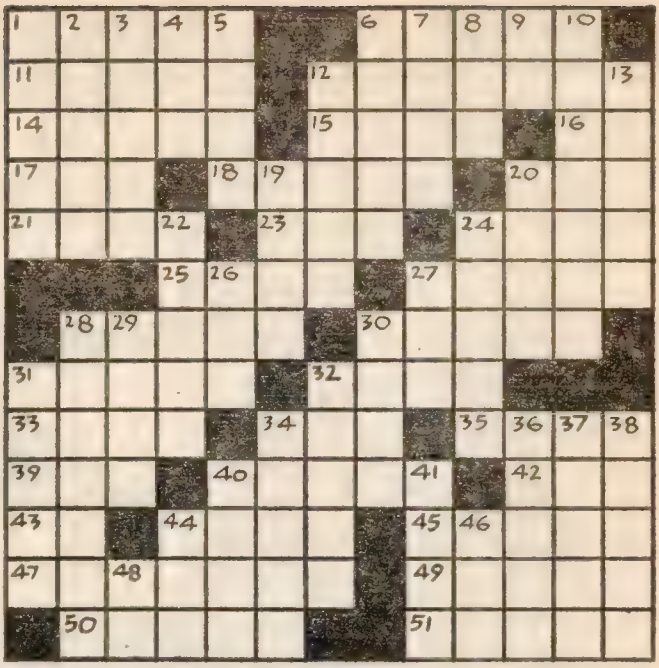
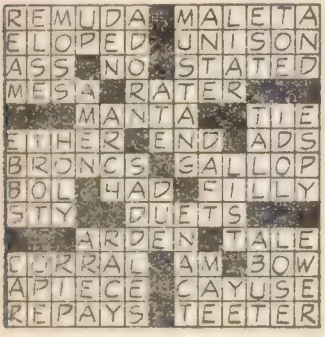


The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Cowboy garment
6 Would-be cowboys
11 Cowboy exhibition
12 Cowboy ropes
14 Go-between
15 Border
16 The thing
17 Calvin's nickname
18 Digging implement
20 To and —
21 Leg joint
23 Well-known vine
24 Brought into existence
25 Native of Denmark
27 To debate
28 Bridle straps
30 To clutch
31 Cowboy shoes
32 Observed
33 Gallops
34 Small bed
35 To challenge
39 — and outs
40 Trigger is one
42 2000 pounds
43 Paid notice
44 Military assistant
45 Approximately
47 Cattle thief
49 Cattle land
50 Writers of poems
51 Beef animal



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 To break or fracture
2 Navajo Indian lodge
3 Girl's name
4 Writing implement
5 Drunkards
6 Papa
7 Prod
8 To expire
9 Each (abbr.)
10 Saddle attachment
12 To depart
13 Rock
19 Metal fasteners
20 Hazes
22 Prepares for publication
24 Owner's mark on cattle
26 Answer (abbr.)
27 Have being
28 Gathering of cattle
29 Eternities
30 Obtains
31 Type of smoking pipe
32 More sore
34 Secret writings
36 To make amends
37 Red cosmetic
38 To come in
40 Sword handle
41 Hearing organs
44 Had lunch
46 Baseball club
48 Therefore

Pike Williams said, "You're not coming back with me."

PAWNEE COUNTRY

By Adam Chase

FOR many days now the train of wagons had been following the gentle slopes of the Platte River valley across Nebraska, keeping close to the great but shallow river and watering the horses in it. This was Pawnee country, and Pike Williams and the other scouts knew that the Pawnee were watching the train of settlers, always keeping out of sight beyond the low, eroded sand hills to the north.

Jimmy Hardesty saw Pike Williams come galloping in from the north this hot, seering day, reining up and dismounting on the run. Pike Williams was a gaunt and quiet man, in many ways more like the Indians than the white settlers who had set out from Independence, Missouri, and were heading for the Oregon Territory. Back in Missouri, Jimmy Hardesty had always pictured a man like Pike Williams when he played scouts and Indians, although he had never seen Pike until the wagon train started out from Independence.

"Pawnees," Pike Williams said to Jimmy's

A LIFE FOR A LIFE, was the Pawnee chief's message

to Hardesty . . . if my son dies, I will keep yours. . . .

father as he wiped the grime from his face with the loose end of a bandana. "Small party heading this way."

"Trouble?" James Hardesty demanded. Hardesty was shorter than Pike Williams, heavier but not fat. The sun had dried and darkened his face and he always kept a double-barrel shotgun, loaded, on the wagon seat beside him.

"I don't think so," Pike Williams said. "The Pawnee make war with the Cheyenne or the Sioux, not with the white man."

"You'd say that, I know," Hardesty said. "I'm going to swing her around anyway."

"Only three braves, Mr. Hardesty."

"Armed?"

"Armed," Pike Williams admitted.

"Then we'll circle."

JIMMY was proud of the way his father didn't have to take orders from anyone, not even Pike Williams or the other scouts. Now a tingling excitement chased up and down his spine as his father turned the lead wagon and brought the clattering, dust-producing train around swiftly in a wide circle that would just accommodate the seventeen wagons.

There was a quick pounding in Jimmy's chest, too, for he had never seen an Indian except for the tame ones who walked the streets of Independence and Westport, back on the Missouri. He wondered if Pa would let him have a gun, too, but decided not to ask because Pa was so busy shouting orders to everyone. They were all obeying except Pike Williams. The scout looked disgusted.

"Aren't you going to fight the Indians?" Jimmy asked him as the men, women, children and cattle ranged anxiously inside the wagon circle.

"You're too young to understand," Pike Williams said, and that was strange because he'd always talked to Jimmy man to man. "Now, your father, he ought to know," Pike Williams went on. "These Indians aren't after trouble, son. They only want to make sure we're passing through their country and not planning to stay."

"Isn't this the Oregon Trail?" Jimmy asked. "Doesn't that mean we're going to Oregon?"

Pike Williams scowled at him thoughtfully from the gaunt, long-nosed, young-old face, and Jimmy suspected a long speech was coming, although Pike Williams wasn't given much to talking.

Just then the Indians—tall and naked on their spotted ponies except for the breech clouts they wore—trotted into the wagon circle and shaded their eyes to squint around through the bright sun. Then, as if the whole scene had been carefully rehearsed, they made straight for Pike Williams where he stood by the Hardesty wagon.

There were low woman-cries from the nearby wagons, but watching the way Pike Williams walked right up to the three Indians on their snorting ponies, Jimmy wasn't afraid. His father, though, had one hand gripping the edge of the wagon seat so he could pull down the double-barreled shotgun in a hurry if he had to. His mother sat still, but her hands were twisting nervously.

Then Pike Williams raised his right hand, palm out, and so did the first Indian. They were talking after that, Indian talk, and Pike Williams, standing there in his buckskin chaps and dusty buckskin shirt, could speak Indian as well as the three braves.

"What are they saying?" Hardesty asked.

"This is Wolf Claw of the Skidi tribe," Pike Williams said. "His father, a sub-chief, wants to know if we plan to stay long in Pawnee country."

Hardesty breathed deeply, swelling out his chest as if there weren't enough air for him. "You tell him," he said quietly to Pike Williams, "that this is United States territory. But we're just passing through."

Pike Williams did so, then listened while the Indian named Wolf Claw spoke, in a soft voice.

Then Williams told Hardesty, "Wolf Claw says the Skidi Pawnee want long seasons of peace with the white man, but would remind you that the Pawnee hunt buffalo and prong-horn here in this country and it is for that reason they are alarmed." Pike Williams scratched the dry, wrinkle-webbed skin at the back of his neck. "Listen, Hardesty. These Indians are all right."

Hardesty pointed to the Winchester rifle lying across Wolf Claw's saddle blanket.

"You ask him, Mr. Williams, why he carries that if he wants peace with the white man."

FOR Jimmy, all this talk was disappointing. His father had always said you couldn't trust Indians, and even made him keep away from the civilized redskins in Independence. Whenever he played Indians, he played hard at fighting. Now, made restless by all this polite talk, he took three steps toward Wolf Claw so that he might see better the fine spotted pony the Indian owned.

Wolf Claw raised the Winchester over his head and waved it in the air, balancing the stock of the weapon on his palm and speaking to Pike Williams in a loud voice.

"Get away from him, Jimmy!" Hardesty shouted. "Williams, tell him to put that rifle down." Hardesty's hand was now resting on the double-barreled shotgun.

"Wolf Claw says the white man gives him rifles so he might fight the Cheyenne and Sioux, who fight the white man."

"Jimmy, come back here!"

"Aw, Pa," complained Jimmy. The spotted pony was the sleekest horse he had ever seen.

Pike Williams spoke rapidly to Wolf Claw, who brought down the rifle quickly, the barrel pointing harmlessly at Jimmy. Alarmed now because his son had not obeyed him and because the Indian had brandished his loaded weapon right here in the midst of all these people and now, apparently, was bringing it to bear on Jimmy, Hardesty jerked down the shotgun and swung it around toward Wolf Claw.

Angrily, Wolf Claw slammed his Winchester against the saddle blanket, but the sudden, unexpected movement unnerved his high-spirited pony. Jimmy barely had time to dive headfirst away as the pony whinnied and reared up on its hind legs. Wolf Claw, grasping the Winchester swiftly because he hadn't secured it to the saddle blanket yet, accidentally discharged it.

Hardesty, his face set grimly, his eyes looking bleakly at Wolf Claw, waited until the pony was pawing the dry ground again with its forelegs, then fired the shotgun from his hip at Wolf Claw.

Mrs. Hardesty screamed, and Jimmy stood up and blinked his eyes. One of the other Indians uttered a hoarse cry. The next thing Jimmy knew, a bronzed hand had flashed down from above, circling his waist and lifting him. He was draped on his stomach across a saddle blanket in front of the Indian, and then the three ponies were galloping away from the wagon circle toward the north, one carrying double and one with a rider, Wolf Claw, slumped forward against its spotted neck.

WHEN Hardesty fired the shotgun, he felt himself driven to the ground, the wind jarred from him, the weapon plucked from his hands.

"Get up," Pike Williams said. "I hope you're satisfied."

Hardesty sat there for a long time, sucking air back into his lungs. "He shot first," Hardesty finally said. "He tried to hit Jimmy."

"It was an accident, his gun going off."

"They've taken Jimmy."

"Yes, they've taken him. Wolf Claw may be dead or dying."

"We'll ride after them," Hardesty said desperately. "At once."

The Tuckers and Fishers and O'Bournes and others had clustered around Hardesty and Pike Williams now, nodding their agreement when the boy's father spoke. Some of the women were trying to comfort Mrs. Hardesty, who was crying softly. Mrs. Tucker offered Hardesty a water dipper to drink from. He attempted a mouthful, but spit it out.

"I'll get some horses," Frankie O'Bourne said.

"No," Pike Williams told him, "that's not the way."

"See here," Hardesty said, "it's easy for you to say. It's not your boy they've taken."

Pike Williams's first quick fury had subsided. Even as he had driven Hardesty to the ground he had felt the anger flow from him. He searched, but could find no hatred in his heart for Hardesty. The man was as much a part of the great movement westward as the train of wagons, the scouts who made the movement possible, or the Indians who hunted their decreasing herds of buffalo and

agreed to treaties with the white man which left them with fewer acres every year.

"I'm paid to get the train through safely," said Pike Williams, speaking as he might speak to a stubborn child. He was only thirty, considerably younger than Hardesty. He had seen a great deal less of the world, but a great deal more of Nebraska. "You wouldn't stand a chance following the Pawnee back to their lodges."

"But they've got my boy."

"I said you wouldn't stand a chance."

"One is dead or wounded. One horse is carrying double. We could overtake them."

"Never. Those ponies are fast."

"What do you think they're going to do, Mr. Williams?" Mrs. Hardesty asked fearfully.

"Make an *arias taka,* I figure—a wolf society, a war party."

"And Jimmy?" Mrs. Hardesty asked.

"I don't know," said Pike Williams.

"We're going after them, Mr. Williams," Hardesty said.

"Don't be a fool. Haven't you done enough damage already?"

"They've got my boy. You bring the horses, Frankie."

"One horse, Frankie," Pike Williams said wearily. "Maintain the circle, Mr. Hardesty. Post guards tonight. I'll go."

In five minutes he was saddled and ready to move out.

UPON an altar of wood frame and stretched buffalo hide, close by the thicket of cottonwood trees which formed the southern boundary of the encampment, was placed the skin of a nearly-white wolf and the headfeathers of Horn Runner, the Skidi sub-chief—Wolf Claw's father. A pipe, an ear of corn, a lariat rope, the skin of a hawk and a smear of red paint had also been added to the pile. This was the sacred war bundle upon which would be consecrated the newly-formed society of the white wolf, the war party.

Horn Runner had never raised a hand in violence against the white man in fifty winters of searching for the lost herds of buffalo. But he had earned a reputation with the Skidi Pawnee and the three other Pawnee nations as a fierce warrior who could sweep the Cheyenne and the Sioux braves before him with the swiftness of the pronghorn for which he was named.

It was a bitter day for him. Earlier they had brought his son Wolf Claw home to the temporary lodges here north of the river. Wolf Claw was not dead, but he had been wounded in the side where the shot had pierced his flesh. Twisted Knee, the maker of medicine, had taken Wolf Claw to the family lodge, where prayers and offerings had been made to Tirawa, the sun, and to Morning Star. Other, more tangible things had also been done for Wolf Claw's grave wound. But even so, even after all this, Twisted Knee had emerged from the lodge with a bowed head, and he would make no promises.

In the beginning the yellow-haired white boy had vexed Horn Runner. He had not asked for a hostage but now found he had one—a big-eyed boy of perhaps ten summers who at first had not cried, but beat at the braves' chests with small, hard fists. Then, finally, he had cried, the tears clearing clean white paths across his grimy cheeks. Still later, he had become so absorbed by the preparations for the war party that he forgot his crying and squatted at the feet of the braves and watched everything solemnly.

And it had come to Horn Runner all at once, like the word of Tirawa, what he must do. If Wolf Claw went to his ancestors, the yellow-haired boy would take his place among the people of the Skidi and in Horn Runner's lodge.

THIS, then, was what it was like going back to his adopted people, thought Pike Williams as he followed easily the spoor of the three ponies across the sand hills north of the River Platte. In a sense he was also following in the path of his namesake, Zebulon Pike, who, except for the Spaniards long ago, was the first white man to find and make peace with the Pawnee.

But then the Skidi and the other Pawnee nations had dwelled in the valley of the Platte itself and owned for themselves all the land they could see from horizon to horizon, though they rode hard for many days. The swift, uncertain tide of history had changed

things. Zebulon Pike had died an Army general but still a young man, fighting against the English at York in the War of 1812. And the Pawnee had left their peaceful river valley and forayed ever further north, while the white man had moved west through their valley.

Nearly ten years ago, Pike Williams had saved a Pawnee brave from drowning when the spring thaw and heavy rains had flooded the shallow river. Because he was footloose and had no ties, Pike Williams had gone north with the brave, to live among the Indians for two happy summers. But the call of his own kind had been too strong in Pike and he had returned in time to Broadwater, and east along the river. There he had spent several years helping the white man move in ever-increasing numbers up the river valley toward the Oregon territory beyond.

Now Pike Williams crested the last range of sand hills which, he knew, moved with the capricious winds. To the west the slopes were gradual, where the wind piled the sand up slowly, a grain at a time; to the east precipitous, where the sand fell downslope before the wind picked it up and carried it again. And here, north of this final range of hills and protected by a dense thicket of cottonwoods, was the Pawnee encampment.

Pike Williams cantered his horse in, head held high and unafraid. Jimmy spotted him first.

"Mr. Williams; Mr. Williams, I'm over here."

Jimmy sprang to his feet and pushed his way through the braves who were watching the strange Pawnee ceremony. He was never so glad to see anyone in all his life. He wanted to ask the braves how the one who was shot was, but he couldn't talk their language and, truthfully, was afraid to approach them. It was funny, though, because Pike Williams didn't seem afraid or angry or anything.

"You just take it easy now, Jimmy," Pike Williams said. "I have some palavering to do, but don't you worry."

All the Indians were smiling at Pike Williams as if they knew him, and he was smiling back. Well, Pike Williams had always behaved as much like an Indian as a white man, and Pa had told Jimmy how the scout had lived for a long time with the Pawnee. Too long, Pa had said.

Jimmy watched while the big Indian with the high-bridged nose, piercing black eyes, and high, skin-stretching cheekbones, went to Pike Williams and looked at him. The Indian was very grave at first, but then he grinned slowly, showing teeth white as the hair against his dark face. They talked together for a long time, Pike Williams and the old Indian who had been leading the peculiar ceremony there by the platform of wood and buffalo skin.

Then they walked away toward one of the lodges and disappeared inside, a still older Indian who walked with a bad limp following them. They stayed inside a long time too and when they came out, parting the lodge-flap, they weren't talking.

PIKE WILLIAMS came over to Jimmy and kneeled beside him.

"Are we going back now?" Jimmy asked. He still couldn't get over how Pike Williams had talked to the Indian chief, kind of man to man.

Pike Williams shook his head slowly. "Listen, Jimmy, I want you to understand this. I'm going back now but you're not coming with me."

A lump swelled dangerously in Jimmy's throat, so he thought he was going to cry. He could feel the tears scalding swiftly in his eyes. But he fought them back and said, "I like it here all right, I guess, but I'd lots rather sleep back at the wagon tonight with Pa and Ma."

Pike Williams tousled his hair and chucked him one playfully on the chin. "It won't be so bad at all," he said. "Think of all the stories you can tell your new friends when you get over to Oregon."

There was a lump in Jimmy's throat again. "Well, gee, Mr. Williams, don't you want to take me back?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, son. Sometimes you want to do something and you think it's right, but there's someone else who wants to do a different thing. You know, something which disagrees with what you want to do. He thinks what he wants to do

is right, too. You understand so far?"

Jimmy blinked away just one solitary tear, and said he did.

"I'll tell you a secret, Jimmy. Often as not they're both right in their own way. It's something you ought to remember."

This seemed to be a day for speechifying on the part of Pike Williams. "What has that got to do with me going back?" Jimmy said. "Don't you want me to go back?"

"Sure I do, and one way or another we're going to get you back. But not just yet. We'll be back and get you in the morning."

"I don't see, if they let you go now, why you can't take me with you."

"Try and understand what I said, son. I've got to be going now. I've got to get back to your family. You want me to tell your ma and pa you're all right?"

"You bet," said Jimmy, but again felt it hard to swallow when he saw Pike Williams swing easily into the saddle and rein his big bay around.

"So long, Jimmy," Pike Williams called. "I'll tell them." And he was gone.

There was a delicious aroma wafting to Jimmy's nostrils from the cookfires, as the sun went down, but he sat there shivering in the sudden cold until it was dark. Slowly, an inch at a time, he made his way to the fire. The stew was so good it almost melted in his mouth.

"IT'S ME," Pike Williams called through the night as he approached the circle of wagons. "Williams. I'm coming through, so hold your fire."

Mrs. Hardesty had steaming hot food waiting for him, and he ate it gratefully while they all talked.

"The boy," said Hardesty anxiously. "You just sit there eating."

"Hungry," Pike Williams said with a grin, then placed his hand on Hardesty's shoulder. "Your boy is all right, Mr. Hardesty, only. . . ."

"Only what?"

"You can see I didn't bring him back with me. I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry!*"

"Horn Runner won't hurt your boy. It was his son, Wolf Claw, you wounded."

"Is he dead?"

"No," said Pike Williams. "He's hanging on. It could go either way, and the maker of medicine thinks they ought to know tonight."

"A medicine man, eh? What does he know about a gunshot wound, Mr. Williams?"

"Plenty. As much as we do, probably. Hardesty, Horn Runner figures that if his own boy dies he ought to keep Jimmy and raise him as his own son."

Mrs. Hardesty dropped the spoon with which she was ladling more beans from the pot for Pike Williams. Frankie O'Bourne hitched nervously at his gunbelt. Hardesty got down his shotgun, broke it open and checked both barrels.

"We're going up there in the morning," he said.

"That's right," Pike Williams told him quietly, "we are. Just you and me, Mr. Hardesty. That is, if you want to."

"What do you mean?"

"I told Horn Runner I'd bring Jimmy's father around in the morning. I told him you were the one who shot his son. I said it was an accident and I thought you were sorry. Will you come with me, alone?" Pike Williams thought, I told Horn Runner something else, too. But that wouldn't interest these people here.

Hardesty clenched his fists, the knuckles showing yellow, not white, in the firelight. He broke the shotgun again and emptied both barrels into the palm of his hand. "I'll go with you," he said.

ALL night Horn Runner kept vigil at his son's blanket. For the present, the society of the white wolf had been forgotten. Pike Williams had said he would return in the morning, and in the heart of Pike Williams, Pawnee brother and white man, was honor.

Winds of night shrieked through the cottonwoods, but in the morning Tirawa, the sun, would come and dispel them. Wolf Claw was still badly hurt and would need much care for a long time, if he survived at all. He was breathing easily now and not moaning in his sleep. The crushed herbs which Twisted Knee had earlier sprinkled on the wound,

and the herb drink which the maker of medicine had given Wolf Claw to drink, must have eased the pain considerably.

In Horn Runner's soul was no hatred for the white man like the Cheyenne or Sioux had. Much would depend upon what Tirawa did with his son. Still more would depend on Pike Williams and the white man he brought back with him to the encampment.

Two hours after dawn, Pike Williams came with Hardesty through the thicket of cottonwood trees. Hardesty, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep, hadn't even bothered to get out of his clothes during the long night.

This might be the last time I'll ride in here a free man, a white man, Pike Williams thought. For, if the worst happened, he would keep his bargain with Horn Runner. He rode slowly to the sub-chief's lodge now, the thoughts chasing one another inside his head—thoughts of his good life, his half-white, half-Indian life. In a lot of ways he was neither fully white nor fully Indian in spirit, and thus he was a lonely man but a happy one.

"Hail, brother of the pale skin," Horn Runner greeted him formally. A white man could never present a proud figure, garbed only in breech clout. Somehow, an Indian like Horn Runner managed it.

"Hail, Horn Runner," said Pike Williams. "How is your son, my brother, the Skidi Wolf Claw?"

"What's he saying?" Hardesty asked. "Tell him I'm sorry, Williams. I mean that. Not just for Jimmy, not to get Jimmy back, although I'd say it then as well. I am truly sorry, Williams. I wish you would tell him that, then let him do as he wishes with me, as long as Jimmy goes free."

"Wolf Claw rests," Horn Runner said. "Twisted Knee and Tirawa are with him now. Is this the man who hurt him, my son the Skidi Wolf Claw?"

"The yellow-haired boy's father," answered Pike Williams. "This is he."

Horn Runner smiled. "You may tell him his son rests still, although Tirawa is high above the horizon."

"Jimmy is doing fine," Pike Williams told Hardesty.

Something which had not been there since yesterday re-entered Hardesty eyes. "Thank God," he said.

Pike Williams addressed Horn Runner. "This man, father of the yellow-haired boy, is deeply sorry over what has happened. I tell you this as a friend and a brother, Horn Runner. It is truth."

Horn Runner waved his right hand and the braves gathered, fiercely silent men with Winchesters, bows and knives. None wore the twin feathers of the eagle on his head for the ears of the white wolf, so Pike Williams knew thoughts of the war party had been forgotten, at least for the present. He glanced around at the ring of braves closing in, and waited for Horn Runner to speak.

"You came, Pike Williams, knowing how I felt and of what we have talked," Horn Runner finally said.

"I promised."

"Then let us see Wolf Claw now."

"What's happening?" Hardesty demanded, as the ring of braves closed behind them and they advanced toward one of the biggest lodges in the encampment.

"We're going to see his son," Pike Williams explained.

JIMMY stirred on his blanket, rolled over and sat up. The sun had not yet climbed sufficiently high in the sky to warm the lodge through its roof opening, and the air within the buffalo-skin walls was chill with the memory of night. Alongside Jimmy on another blanket lay the wounded Indian, the figure of the medicine man crouching over him and chanting in a barely audible voice.

Then Jimmy bounced to his feet for joy, with the smile threatening to split his face permanently. Into the lodge came the white-haired Indian, with Pike Williams and his father. Pa came over to Jimmy and messed his hair the same way Pike Williams had yesterday. Jimmy wished they would stop doing that one of these days; it made him feel like a baby.

"I'm fine, Pa," he said. "It was great here."

"Everything's going to be all right now, son. You can come on outside with me."

The white-haired Indian said something, and Pike Williams shook his head.

"Stay put," Pike Williams said, then talked with the Indian again. When Jimmy turned to face the doorflap of the lodge, he saw a stolid Indian brave standing there with a Winchester across his arm.

"Twisted Knee still doesn't know about the boy," Pike Williams told Jimmy's father. "It looks like we stay."

"But you said Jimmy could go free no matter what happened."

"I said I hoped he could," Pike Williams answered, and spoke to the white-haired Indian once more. Then: "Horn Runner says that if his son Wolf Claw goes to join his ancestors, Jimmy will be escorted back to the wagon train."

"Williams," said Hardesty. "You've done it, Williams."

But Pike Williams's lips made a thin straight line across his face. "Only Jimmy," he said.

The Winchester-armed brave shuffled inside the lodge. It was very quiet in there, like an ice-house in summer, Jimmy thought. Jimmy thought also that the brave would use his Winchester for sure if any of them tried to go near the door-flap.

Then an amazing thing happened. The wounded brave opened his eyes and smiled weakly up at the white-haired Indian, who quickly knelt at his side and lifted his hand and held it, talking to him softly.

"If Wolf Claw had not lived," Horn Runner told Pike Williams later, "the yellow-haired boy would have been free to go. But this man, his father, would have died at my hand. And as well, something else." Horn Runner smiled for the second time. "For that something else, I am sorry, Pike Williams."

"I wouldn't have made a very good Skidi, anyway," Pike Williams said.

"You would have made a Skidi in the image of Morning Star, my brother. You are free to go."

Still later, on the trail across the sand hills sweeping ever inexorably eastward under the strength of the wind, Pike Williams said, "You're a brave man, Mr. Hardesty. Horn Runner would have killed you."

Hardesty squeezed Jimmy's shoulder as the boy sat ahead of him on their horse. "Today I learned something about the Indian," he said. "I have more than hate and fear in my heart now, Williams."

Pike Williams spurred his horse ahead as they neared the circle of wagons. Behind him he could hear Jimmy shouting eagerly, and the happy answering shouts from the wagon train. Pike could see Jimmy's mother, with her arms outstretched toward her son.

Soon the circle would form a line and move westward through the river valley. This day Pike Williams had learned something about the Indian and the white man, both his brothers. What he had learned was good.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 74)

1. Lincoln County, N. M.
2. Floyd.
3. Rodeo hands.
4. Oklahoma
5. Uncle Dick Wootton.
6. Democrat pasture, though I don't know why!
7. Ride it, I reckon. "Yakima" was old cowboy slang in some sections for an Indian pony.
8. New Mexico.
9. The Mansion, Bull's Manse, Castle, Payroll Palace, Big House, White House, Casa Grande, Main Deck, Papa's Palace, Old Man's Manse, Big Sugar Shack, Powder Mill, and doubtless others.
10. Santa Rosa, California, where the Western Writers of America's annual convention will be held in May, 1955, instead of at San Francisco as first announced.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

ONCE there was a farm boy named John Henry who lived in Texas and was crazy about Wild West shows. He was a poor farm boy, and he dreamed of being a cowboy forking wild buckers to the cheers of the crowd.

Back around the turn of the century there weren't many real rodeos, but there were plenty of little "bronc shows" with trick riders and ropers, a few cowboys and a string of buckers, one of which was usually advertised as the meanest, orneriest outlaw bronc in the wild and woolly West.

It wasn't often that the boy could scrape together enough pennies for a ticket when a rodeo came to town, but sometimes he could work his way in by carrying feed and water for the stock. That was how he got to see Booger Red's Wild West Show and how he first met Flaxie, the horse that made John Henry one of the greatest riders of all time.

Flaxie was a beautiful brute, whose lines were a thoroughbred's. He'd been a racer, and his slim legs looked it. And yet he had the strength of a farm horse and the disposition of an outlaw.

Flaxie started his career as a fair-to-middling race horse, but apparently he felt the quirt too often and too painfully. He developed a hatred of jockeys and then turned every race into a bucking contest. He cared nothing about reaching the finish line—all he wanted was to get the jockey off his back.

He succeeded in this so often and so spectacularly that he was sold to Booger Red, and soon he became the star of Red's string. At first it took a lash of the quirt to make him buck, but after he got into the spirit of things he tossed off anyone in the saddle.

John Henry watched in excitement as one cowboy after another landed in the dirt. He told himself, someday I'll ride that horse!

He went back to the farm, though, for a few more years. The summer he was 16, another show came to town. John Henry was disappointed that it was Texas Bud Snell's—until he saw Flaxie, just as beautiful as ever and even more wicked. So wicked, in fact, that Texas Bud was having trouble getting his cowboys to ride the bronc.

And that was undoubtedly why Bud hired John Henry as a regular rider in his show—to ride Flaxie and to get bucked off.

In show after show, sometimes twice a day, John Henry forked the bronc and went flying. He was constantly black and blue, but he never complained—he didn't want to get fired and sent back to the farm.

John Henry went on monotonously forking the bronc and getting bucked off, but he never forgot his vow to ride Flaxie and he never quit trying. And then one day he made it. He stayed aboard as though he was glued to the saddle; none of Flaxie's twists and leaps could shake him. At last the horse surrendered and stood trembling and dejected, allowing John Henry, for the first time, to dismount under his own power.

This success persuaded John Henry that he was a real bronc-buster. He was no longer afraid of having to go back to the farm. He quit Texas Bud's show, and on his own he became one of the best and most famous of the early cowboys.

Many other times he tried to ride Flaxie again, but he never succeeded. Flaxie went on tossing cowboys until his death at 22 in 1925. And John Henry went on riding broncs until he retired from rodeo when he was 50 years old, in 1944.

To him, Flaxie was not only the greatest bronc of all time, but also the bronc who made him a great cowboy.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

Bullet Range

By Dan Riordan

Sally pushed her sister aside, threw her arms around Reilly

THE STORY SO FAR: Rancher REILLY MEYERS has seen something that will help to convict HERB WINEHAVEN, MAX HORGAN, and BURK SEEVER of rustling, and they are out to get him. Seever is jealous, too, because his wife, SALLY, who used to be Reilly's girl, is pursuing him again. Reilly tries to shake her off by asking her sister, TESS ISHAM, to marry him, but she refuses marriage on that basis. Meanwhile Reilly and his friends MILO BUCKS and ERNIE and WALT SLAUGHTER have spirited Ernie's girl, JANE ALFORD, away from BURKHAUSER's saloon, where she has been working, apparently under pressure from the rustlers. But Seever forces Jane to return, and Reilly and Milo follow her back to the saloon.

As this concluding installment opens, Reilly has been cornered by one of the rustlers' men, INDIAN JIM, and is shooting it out with him

CONCLUSION

THERE was desperation in Reilly's lunge at Indian Jim, but the blow fell far short, only driving the barrel of the breed's Spencer down. It went off against the bar, ripping through and destroying a case of bottled stock below.

Grabbing the carbine barrel, Reilly swung a back-handed blow with his pistol that caught Indian Jim on the shoulder. When the leathery man cried out, Reilly hit him again, squarely this time. Reilly leaned across the bar and watched him wilt, his head rapping the brass spittoon as he fell.

As Reilly shouted for Milo Bucks to come over, he saw Harry Peters hurrying down the street. The marshal came panting into the saloon a scant moment after Milo's arrival. Burkhauser was moving frantically about, estimating the damage in his mind.

Peters looked at Indian Jim impersonally.

Reilly said, "Where were you, Harry, when the shooting started?"

"In bed, asleep," Peters said, and there was no apology in his voice. "By the time I got my pants on you'd already crossed the street and had come in through the back way. Rather than interfere and spoil your play, I waited."

Milo leaned down and picked up Indian Jim's rifle. "That's twice I nearly got killed with this thing." He carried it outside and hammered it to pieces on the stone hitching-block. He threw the wreck into the gutter and came back inside.

Indian Jim had just had a pail of water thrown into his face and was trying to sit up. "Now we'll get him to say a few words," Reilly said softly.

"No rough stuff," Peters warned. "Testimony you get that way won't hold up in court."

Reilly's temper slipped. "You play it nice and safe, Peters, but *I* got him. Now you just go back to bed and I'll finish the job."

"Gladly," Peters said. "I want no part of it." He got as far as the door, paused there. "In case you do learn anything of value, you'll let me know, won't you?" He smiled and tapped his inner pocket. "After all, *I* have the badge."

After he went out, Milo said, "Isn't he a fancy one?"

Indian Jim was bracing himself with both hands against the bar.

"Better get him outside," Burkhauser said anxiously. "He looks like he's going to be sick, and I got enough mess in here as it is."

Milo and Reilly took the breed out the back way into the dark valley.

Reilly said, "Start blabbing, Jim."

"Nothing to say," Indian Jim mumbled, and Reilly hit him.

The blow cascaded Jim backward into a stack of empty beer barrels, which fell over on him. When the last one stopped rolling down the alley, Reilly pushed him erect.

"Want me to ask again, Jim?" he said.

Blood ran from Indian Jim's nose, and he sniffed like a small boy with a cold. "What you want to know?"

"Who's top man in your rustler bunch?"

Indian Jim shook his head, and Reilly hit him again, flush in the mouth this time. His hold on Jim's shirt kept the dark-skinned man from falling.

"No more," Jim said. "I'm finish anyway. Top man combine. Horgan most. Him and Herb Winehaven, Seever, Sheriff Henderson."

"Henderson?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "He ride where he please. Spot herd that's easy picking. Horgan's bunch moves 'em. Winehaven butchers 'em. Seever peddles to reservation."

"You said you were finished. What does that mean?"

"Horgan shove me out," Jim said. "I let you two get away other day." He laughed. "You smart, Reilly. Figure out how brands get changed. You want to know something? Horgan raiding your Hangnoose spread right now. When you get back, Childress's cows be gone."

"Why, you—"

Indian Jim held up his hand. "I give you this straight, Reilly. Don't I get break?"

FOR a moment Reilly pondered, then spoke to Milo. "Bring his horse around here."

After Milo ran down the alley, Reilly said to the Indian, "I'll give you a head start. You're getting off lucky."

"I know," Jim said. They stood there in the darkness until Milo came back with the horse. Indian Jim mounted and rode away.

Walking across the street, Reilly and Milo found Harry Peters on the hotel porch. The marshal studied Reilly, then said, "Well, what did you learn?"

"Horgan's the boss. Seever, Winehaven and Henderson are in it." He explained their parts in the rustling. "You're a Federal officer, Peters. You'd better see the Indian Agent, too."

"And the proof?" Peters's voice was soft.

Reilly stared at him, trying to remember something else Indian Jim had said, something important, but it wouldn't come to him. "I told you the facts," Reilly said. "Now you do what you please about it."

"What about the herd?" Milo asked Reilly.

"What herd?" Peters took his cigar from his mouth and sat up straighter in his chair.

"Jim said that Horgan is out now rustling Childress's herd, the ones wintering on Hangnoose range." Reilly looked grim. "Someone is going to get hurt for this, Harry."

Reilly turned his back and walked to the door with Milo, then halted. The vague thing Indian Jim had mentioned was on the tip of his tongue, then it receded. He shrugged, and the two Hangnoose riders went on to the stable. A few minutes later they rode out of town at a fast clip.

They were hardly out of sight when Harry Peters was moving swiftly along the quiet back street that led to the jail. At the door he withdraw the .38 from the shoulder holster and cupped it in his hands.

He rapped on the jail office door and heard Henderson's answering grumble, then the lock snapped and Peters stepped inside, sweeping off his hat and holding it in front of him. Henderson popped a match and lit the lamp, then stood squinting in the light.

"What was the shooting about?" he asked, plainly not caring.

Peters smiled. "That was your friend Indian Jim. The shooting you didn't hear was his mouth in the alley. Reilly and Milo heard him."

"About the bunch?" Henderson's eyes were wary now.

"I'm afraid so," Peters said, leaning against the door. He held his hand laxly across his stomach, the hand dangling. "This might be awkward for you, Jack."

"I reckon it will be. You don't like this yourself, do you, Harry?"

"An officer involved?" The marshal shook his head. "I've never respected a man who got caught. What are you going to do about it?"

"It's pretty sudden," Henderson said. He picked a pair of pants off the floor and got into them. He donned his shirt next and stood there with the suspenders draped around his hips. "What do you think I ought to do, Harry?"

"I'm a Federal officer," Peters said softly. "You know what I have to do."

Henderson stood as still as if frozen, before he finally mumbled, "You 'going to give me any kind of a break?" His hand moved slowly, almost twitching.

"You think you have one coming?"

Suddenly Henderson whirled, diving for the gun beneath the pillow on the cot where he had been sleeping. Peters gave him a break—at least he waited until the sheriff had the gun in his hand and was turning. Then he shot three times, double action, right through the derby he was holding.

He stared down at the dead man and said aloud, "You damn fool! You knew it had to be this way, didn't you?"

He reloaded, put the gun away, and let himself out. The night held a definite chill and he pulled the collar of his coat tighter as he retraced his steps to the hotel to make out his report.

REILLY MEYERS saw the glow of the fire three miles away. He cursed and rode faster, and when he tore into the yard Milo was right behind him. He flung himself from the saddle when he saw Walt Slaughter.

Ernie lay face down on the ground. In the flickering firelight a bullet hole in his side showed splintered ends of ribs. Walt stood beside his brother's body, saying nothing.

The outbuildings were glowing ashes now, but the house and barn were still burning furiously.

"All the horses were turned out before the barn caught," Walt said, and motioned toward Ernie. "He got it then. I was holed up by the well."

"You see who?"

"Horgan's bunch." There was no life in

Walt's voice. He stared at Reilly. "Why did it have to be him? He was always laughing. He liked living better than anybody."

"There's no answer to some things," Reilly said, and touched Milo. "Get a couple of shovels. We'll bury him first."

Milo moved off and Walt spoke, almost as if to himself. "People's lives can get twisted up, like Ernie's and Jane's. Why couldn't she have stayed with him? What kind of a girl is she, anyway?"

"I think she loved him," Reilly murmured. "I hope he never lost faith in her."

"He didn't say a word after she left," Walt said. "I never heard him speak."

"Too bad," Reilly said.

Milo came back with the shovels. "They're not much good," he said, took the one with the handle nearly burned off.

They dug for a half hour, then wrapped Ernie Slaughter in a horse blanket. They gathered rocks to build a mound over him, but when they were finished they could find no words. Reilly knew that none were needed. A man like Ernie Slaughter left a thousand small memories that would endure a lifetime.

Walt caught up the horses then, and they mounted. He sat with his Sharps across the saddle while Reilly and Milo checked their weapons. A horse came pounding across the flats and each man turned, his gun ready.

The light from the burning house had faded to almost nothing now. A timber burned through, falling in a shower of sparks, but other than that it was all over.

As the rider drew nearer, they recognized a neighbor, Jim Buttelow. He stared at the burned-out ranch.

"I saw the glow from my front porch," he said. Then he saw the new grave and realized Ernie lay there. He swore for a full minute, the deep, rage-filled cursing of a strong man who could hate.

Reilly quickly told him all that had happened.

Buttelow said, "I'll ride to let Paul Childress know. Lovelock's in the hills, or I'd get him too." He shifted the cartridge belt on his hips. "There'll be enough of us to take that crew at Winehaven's."

"Remember I want Seever alive," Reilly said. "I want to stand by the scaffold and hear that rope sing."

"We'll get him," Buttelow said, and spurred away.

Reilly did not hurry when the three of them rode from his ranchyard. He knew how slowly cattle moved, even when they were being pushed. The wind was cold and there would be bad weather in the next few days. Overhead, thin mare's tail clouds tried to blot out the starlight. Tomorrow morning the clouds would be thicker, wiping out the sun. By evening there would be rain.

Ahead lay a tough trail, for which they were ill-equipped. There would be only cold rain here on the flats, but in the mountains it would turn to snow. Passes would fill quickly with wind drifts and the going would be tough. The tougher the better, he decided, and settled down for a long ride.

BY MORNING they had skirted the west shore of the lake. As they drove on, Reilly swung farther north and into country that was solidly timbered. For two driving days he led his saddle companions on a leisurely jaunt, and the days grew colder. On the afternoon of the third day it began to rain, a cold drizzle that soaked them to the skin.

Through the day's last remaining light they wound upward, always screened by the timber's thickness. When Reilly stopped to build a fire, the rain had turned into light snow. By the time they had warmed themselves the ground was thinly covered, and moisture dripped from the trees with a steady drumming.

Neither Walt nor Milo protested when Reilly mounted again. They followed him in weary silence, and through the night they moved on. Around nine they began to go down toward lighted windows in a valley below.

The raw odor of sawed pine and spruce became stronger as the distance narrowed. From the shadow outlines of the buildings and the gaunt skeleton of the loading rig, Reilly recognized a logging outfit. The cookshack sported lights, and they dismounted and went in. They huddled around the long cookstove

while the cook gave them baleful glances.

"Coffee there," he said, eying their wet clothes, whiskered faces, and guns. They helped themselves and stood mute, taking in the warmth.

The door opened and a big man came in. He came up to them and said, "I'm Monaghan, ramrod here."

"You've got good coffee," Reilly said. "We appreciate the heat."

Monaghan's dark eyes moved from one to the other. "A man'd have to be in a hurry to be out on a night like this."

"We are," Reilly said, and told him about the rustling in terse phrases.

Monaghan looked at Walt Slaughter. "Is that soot on your face, man?"

"We had a fire, and a dead man," Reilly said. "A good man."

"Ah, now," Monaghan said, his manner changing. "You'll need gear to travel." He flipped his head around. "Cookie, fill a possible for these lads."

"That's kind of you," Reilly said. "We're willing to pay."

Monaghan said, "Trouble makes all men brothers. You'll need slickers for this weather. Snow's building in the hills."

"There's a good pass twenty miles above here," Reilly said. "They might drive through there. That's where we'll be waiting." He put his coffee cup aside. "We could use some sleep if we could bunk in your barn."

"You're welcome to it," Monaghan said.

They went out, led the horses to a large barn, and turned them into stalls. Bedding down in the hay, they wrapped up in their blankets and fell asleep.

Four hours later Reilly woke. Snow was still falling heavier now. He found a lantern and lit it. Walt and Milo stirred, then sat up, red-eyed and groggy. They were rolling their blankets and saddling when Monaghan came through the night toward the barn, carrying heavy coats and another rifle.

Reilly took the coats and they donned them. He said, "We'll see that these are returned."

"There were no holes in 'em," Monaghan said. "We'll leave none of you up there for the wolves." He motioned toward the distant hills and a point where the ground flattened out. "That's longer, but there'll be less snow. On the way back you can bed your herd down there. That's an old burn, mostly grown over now."

"We'll see you on the way back," Reilly said, and mounted. He handed the rifle to Milo and they rode out.

They topped the blunted ridge and crossed over it. The wind here was ripping and snow slanted at a sharp angle, but Monaghan had been right. The ridge was almost clean and traveling was easy.

Through the rest of the night they worked their way west. The snow was getting deeper and the wind whisked it into cone-shaped drifts and piled windrows.

COLD bit through their clothes, and by now there was no feeling at all in their feet. Dawn was slow in coming, and a dirty gray when it got there, but by then they were deep into the canyon. Reilly pushed his horse ahead and studied the ground, although the wind was blowing hard and no track would last more than an hour.

He rode back and said, "I think we're ahead of 'em. Let's find ourselves a hole and crawl into it."

They rode up the canyon for a mile until they found a spot where some high rocks formed an overhang.

"Up there, Walt," Reilly said. "Milo and I will let the herd go through, then seal off the back. You close the stopper when you hear the shooting."

Walt rode halfway up the slope, then dismounted and led his horse the rest of the way. Milo crossed over to the other side of the canyon, for he did not want to leave any sign for Horgan to stumble across. He picked his way carefully and, when he was four hundred yards down from Walt, picketed his horse. Reilly took a position opposite him and lay belly-flat in the screening brush.

Waiting was the hardest, and the cold made it worse. By noon Reilly was beginning to think he had guessed wrong. At three in the afternoon he was sure of it, and was about to signal Milo, when he heard the first lowing of cattle below.

The wind was right, so the others heard it

also. No longer was waiting a chore.

Through the deeper drifts the leaders plowed, driven on by the two men at point. Across the bobbing backs Reilly saw four more men, one of them Horgan, behind the herd, pushing them on. He cocked his .44 and waited.

They came on slowly, for the snow was deep and the cattle were tired from being pushed hard. Reilly let the leaders pass but, when the drag began to close in, thrust out his gun. Holding his wrist with his other hand to steady it, he shot a man cleanly from his saddle.

A man yelled and whipped his head around quickly, and from the other side Milo Bucks's rifle bellowed. A rider jack-knifed from his horse and lay still.

Reilly saw Max Horgan then and flipped a shot at him, but the rustler whirled away and the bullet passed to one side.

The cattle stopped and tried to mill, but they were tired and the snow was like a chute on each side of them. The man riding with Horgan was shooting at anything he thought might conceal a man. Reilly followed him with his gun, then squeezed off. The .44 recoiled and the man dropped his rifle, falling forward in the saddle.

Horgan and Milo were exchanging shots now and Reilly shifted his aim, trying to get a good bead on the rustler chief. Horgan was spurring his horse in circles to make a difficult target, and Reilly shot twice more without effect.

Suddenly Horgan had had enough, and drove his horse back down the trail. Milo fired a tardy shot after him with no effect.

There was no further shooting from the point.

Reilly rose to his feet, calling, "It's all over!"

Milo had trouble mounting and, when he had worked his way down to the drag, Reilly saw the bloody handkerchief tied around his thigh.

"Bad?" Reilly asked.

"I'll live. How are we going to turn these cows in here?"

[*Turn page*]

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"From the other end," Reilly said, and they began to fight their way through the herd.

Walt had mounted and was waiting when they made the point. A dead man lay in the snow, half out of sight.

Turning the herd in a closed place is not an easy job, but they waved their slickers, shouting, to startle the leaders. For awhile there was only faint milling, then the cattle began to turn. By working their way through, the men began to move the steers at the drag. In two hours they had them inching back down the draw.

AT NOON the next day the snow stopped falling, and Reilly felt easier. He ached all over and his eyes burned from lack of sleep. Milo rode hunched over in the saddle, for his leg was bothering him.

When the herd was milling around the burn area, Reilly gathered wood for a fire. Walt slid from his horse and helped Milo down.

"Stay here, Walt," Reilly said. "I'll take Milo on to the logging camp."

Walt nodded and huddled over the fire. Reilly got Milo back on his horse and led him up the slope. By dark, the lights of the camp below came in sight. They rode toward them, around stumps upthrust through the snow.

Reilly's shout as he drew near roused the camp, and Monaghan came to meet them at a run. He picked Milo out of the saddle and carried him into the bunkhouse. Two men stripped off his heavy clothes, while another went for the cook.

Monaghan said, "I see you got your cattle." He bent over Milo and examined the wound. "He's lost blood, but the bone's not broken. I hate a broken bone. A man has to suffer too much." He straightened. "Where's the other man?"

"Up on the burn with the cattle. I don't like to leave him alone."

"I'll send two men up," Monaghan said. "They don't know anything about cattle, but they can help in some ways."

"One got away," Reilly said, "the one I wanted most of all. I'll have to go after him."

"Go ahead," Monaghan said. "We'll take care of the lad here and send him on when he's better." He saw Reilly waver and added, "Get it done, man."

Reilly nodded and went outside. One of Monaghan's men had changed Reilly's saddle to a rangy bay that looked like a stayer. Reilly mounted stiffly and turned out of the yard. He did not hurry now, and he made camp every night. It was six days before he halted on the flats east of Buckeye and looked at the town through the first red rays of the winter sun.

Somehow it didn't seem the same. Nothing would be the same with Ernie Slaughter dead. He had been a part of Reilly's life, the part a man reserves only for his closest friends.

The wild bunch was on the run now, but the thought gave him no satisfaction, for he was not a manhunter by nature. Quite easily he could convince himself that Sally was the reason for his dissatisfaction, but he was too honest for that. Because he had wanted flame and tumult in a woman, he had sold his integrity. For Sally was not complete. A part of her was selfish and mean, never for a moment considering the pleasure of giving for giving's sake.

Reilly dismounted at the end of the street and stood thinking of Sally and himself. Because she never gave, but just took, he had formed himself to be the same way in trying to match her, trying to establish some semblance of compatability where none could exist.

He tied his horse and clomped onto the boardwalk, thoughts still milling in his mind. He had wanted Sally, and had pushed and twisted things to conform to his desires. He blamed her for letting him, but she was the kind who took pleasure in seeing a man destroy himself for her. This fed some starved facet of her ego.

Walking slowly down the street, Reilly entered the hotel and went up the stairs. As he passed Tess Isham's door he heard arguing voices inside.

Without knocking, he opened the door and walked in. The voices broke off suddenly, and Tess and Sally turned to look at him. Sally pushed her sister aside and threw her arms about him. She kissed him longingly, but he stood stiffly, disinterested.

His eyes went past Sally and locked with Tess Isham's.

REALIZING that she was embracing stone, Sally released him and fell back.

Reilly's voice was cool. "It didn't work, did it?"

"I've been frantic with worrying about you," she said.

He smiled. "Sally, you don't lie worth a damn."

"Lie? I love you more than anything in the world!"

"More than yourself?" Then, after a pause, "Where's your husband?"

"At home," she said. "He brought Jane Alford with him." She moved close again and her voice pleaded. "Reilly, can you forget our love was once so wonderful?"

"I've already forgotten it," he said.

He looked at Tess. She stood with her hands at her sides, not taking her eyes from his face. There was hope in her eyes, an expectancy that had always been missing before.

"You can't mean that!" Sally said.

"I do mean it," Reilly said. "You'd be no good for any man—not for long, anyway. There should be room in a man's mind for other things besides worry about whether his wife is faithful or not. I'd have to keep you locked up, Sally, and frankly, you aren't worth it."

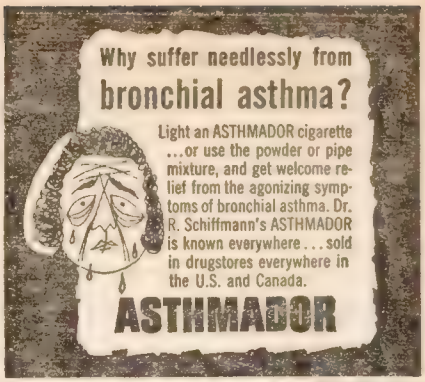
"How can you speak to me like that?"

"It's easy," Reilly said. "I've just found out I don't want you at any price." She tried to slap him, but he grabbed her wrist and shoved her toward the door. "Go on, Sally. Go on now."

She stared at him, and saw nothing in his face to give her hope. Then her eyes hardened and she went out, slamming the door after her. Reilly let out a long breath.

Tess was still standing motionless when he faced her, a great gentleness in his eyes. "Sometimes a man doesn't know what love is. He thinks a lot of foolish things and makes believe he's in love, but it isn't like the feeling I have for you, Tess." He shook his head sadly. "The strange thing is that I've always had this feeling for you—kind of a real resting feeling when we're together. I guess that's why I've always come to you when I've been troubled in mind."

[*Turn page*]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He made a fanlike motion with his hands.

"A man's mistakes can be pretty big. I've made 'em—you know what they are without my telling you. I've hurt you plenty, and I guess the hurt's too deep to wipe out. But if I had it to do over again, we'd sure be married by now."

When he turned to the door she found her voice and spoke his name. He looked at her and saw that she was crying.

"Reilly," she whispered, "maybe I'm not enough woman for you, like she's always said. But I'd be good for you, Reilly, because I've loved you for such a long, long time."

He did not touch her. There was no need now. They merely looked at each other and knew the bond was there. No power could ever break it.

"I've got some work unfinished," he said. "I'll be back."

"I don't mind waiting," Tess said, and he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

He paused at the head of the stairs to thumb spent shells from his gun and reload. On the hotel porch he paused again as he saw Jane Alford running toward him. She stumbled in her haste to mount the steps.

Her hair was loose and her breath short. "Reilly, I'm glad I found you in time!"

"Are you?" He was remembering Ernie crying at the corral.

"I don't blame you for hating me," Jane said, "but you've got to listen."

"I don't hate you. I just don't understand you, Jane."

SHE pressed her hands against her cheeks, and tears filled her eyes. "You think I'm not thinking of *him?* I loved him so much it killed me inside when he died."

"But you left him, Jane."

"I had no choice. I wish I'd told Ernie that—Winehaven and that squaw he lives with over at the slaughter house have my son." She took his arms and tried to shake him. "Burk's always held it over my head, threatening to take the boy away if I didn't do what he said." She saw that Reilly did not understand. "I made a mistake, before we moved here. We left after the baby was born and came here. Ma had met Winehaven—she lived with him, but it didn't work out. That was before we came here. Reilly, I thought I could get a new start with Ernie, but then Ma died. Winehaven had been keeping my boy at the slaughterhouse." She smiled feebly. "He's seven now, Reilly. He's all I have left."

"We'll get him," Reilly said. "I'll tell Peters."

"No, don't tell him! I'll never see my son again, I know. And I know that because of what I'm telling you now Winehaven or the squaw will kill him. Maybe it'll pay me back for the way I hurt Ernie."

"You're not making sense, Jane."

"Winehaven used me, Reilly. He wanted me to go to the Agency, so I did. After he got something on the Agent, he got me the job in the saloon." She looked at him steadily. "Do you remember now what you saw at Winehaven's, that day of the shooting that you went to jail for?"

For a reason he couldn't explain, a vision of a sorrel horse came into his mind. Suddenly he said, "I saw Harry Peter's sorrel there." Even as he said it, it shocked him. Then he remembered clearly.

"He killed Henderson," she said. "You were in the hills. I got away from Burk, but Peters is after you now. He's got a gun, and Max Horgan is with him."

Reilly acted as though he hadn't heard her. He was remembering a lot of little things—the way Peters had acted, the way he had talked, the things he hadn't done, and the pat excuses he'd had for doing the things he had done. Somehow it all fell into place, and at last he recalled what had been on the edge of his mind when he had last spoken to Peters. Indian Jim had said that Reilly had figured out how the brands had been changed, and Reilly had mentioned that only to Harry Peters!

"Go up to Tess Isham's room," Reilly said gently, giving Jane a small push.

After she went inside he remained on the porch, thinking hard. Jane was Herb Winehaven's common-law step-daughter! He hadn't know that. There was a lot he didn't know.

He listened to the whine of the wind as it husked down the street, then took off his heavy coat to give his arms more freedom, and stepped down to the boardwalk. There was

no traffic at all on the street and, as far as he was concerned, the town was deserted.

Clinging to the walls, Reilly moved with caution, searching every gap and doorway. A door banged somewhere nearby, and he gave a start. Then he saw that, down the street and across from him where Ben Cannoyer's old stable reared up in the middle of a lot, a door was banging listlessly in the wind.

Reilly stopped when a man came out of a small store next to the stable, stood in the doorway a minute, then went back inside. This rang a warning bell in Reilly's mind, for there was no reason for the man's hasty retreat. He had been moving slowly, casually, and there had been nothing in his manner to arouse suspicion, yet the man had smelled trouble.

Reilly focused his attention on the doorway. Then Max Horgan came out on the boardwalk.

"Well, Reilly," he said, "one by one you've got us all."

"All but you, Max," Reilly said. Twenty yards separated them and dust rose in swirls, pelting the raw board buildings.

"Man to man," Horgan was saying. "No ambush this time, Reilly."

The man's talking too much, Reilly thought, and from the corner of his eye picked up a slight movement in the stable door. He saw what a sucker he had been, for although the stable was seventy yards away, Seever was packing a rifle in his good arm as he came out.

REILLY drew on Horgan then, and Horgan matched him. Reilly let the hammer slide from under his thumb as the Remington came level. The sudden *pop* vanished in the wind, and Horgan's bullet chipped wood by Reilly's head. Horgan's knees bent slowly as though they were melting wax, and his gun went off again as he sprawled in the gutter.

A gun went off, but Reilly was moving and the bullet tore through a window. He saw Burk Seever peer around the door, holding a rifle. On one knee, Reilly raised his gun and braced his arm against the tie-rail, firing as

[*Turn page*]

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Seever awkwardly worked the lever.

The shot took the big man high somewhere, and he spun around. But he braced himself and tried to raise the rifle again. Reilly cocked his pistol and waited. He saw Seever bring the rifle to his shoulder, but still he didn't fire at the wounded man. Burk fired, but he was falling and the bullet spanged in the dust. Then he lay across the rifle, his legs thrashing.

Reilly waited until Seever was no longer moving, then stood up and put his gun away.

From the other end of town a party of horsemen came on at a trot. When they breached the far end of the street, he recognized Childress and Murdock in the lead. Buttelow carried a small boy on his saddle while Winehaven rode between them, a lead rope around his neck.

They saw Reilly and came up, dismounting by the hitch-rail. They were a tough-looking group, tired, unshaven. Reilly looked at the boy, and the child stared back.

"Winehaven's up in smoke," Buttelow said. "Everything's cleaned out now."

"Not quite," Reilly said. "There's one more."

He moved past them, and they followed him to the New Congress Hotel on the side street. The men looked at each other, puzzled, but said nothing. Buttelow, trailing along behind, carried the boy.

Harry Peters was on the hotel porch, puffing contentedly on his cigar. He eyed the men as they stopped in a line before him. He took the cigar from his mouth and said, "I heard shooting."

"Max and Burk have had their try," Reilly said. "They didn't make it, Harry."

"Too bad. But I didn't think they would." He put the cigar back in his mouth, hunched his shoulders, and swayed slightly as the wind hit him. "Winter's here. Likely to bring snow on the flats."

Buttelow didn't understand any of this. Neither did the others. One of Childress's riders took the boy from Buttelow and talked softly to him. Peters watched, his face inscrutable. He took a couple of long pulls on his cigar, then spun it into the street. The wind caught it and rolled it along, sparks flying in a brief shower.

Looking at Reilly he said, "You think you have evidence now that will stand up in court?"

"I've got enough," Reilly said. "I remember who owned the sorrel."

"That's pretty thin," Peters said, a flat expression in his eyes.

"Winehaven will talk," Reilly said.

"He might, at that," Peters said mildly, and fished another cigar from his vest pocket. Because the move was so natural, he caught Reilly off-guard when he came up with a blunt-nosed .38 in his hand.

Reilly made a dive for the marshal's legs as the gun went off. The report was deafening that close to his ear, and powder stung his neck. Winehaven caught the bullet in the hip. Then Reilly and Peters were thrashing around on the porch. Reilly outweighed the marshal, but Peters had a wiry strength. Knocking the gun hand aside, Reilly tried to hit the marshal on the jaw, but Peters jerked his head aside and took the blow on the neck.

Reilly kept flailing with his left hand, trying to secure a grip on Peter's wrist. The .38 went off again and the bullet puckered the porch ceiling. Then Reilly kneed the marshal and as he felt him relax his hand closed over the gun and he hung on.

Peters tried to pull the trigger double action, but Reilly had the cylinder locked and the marshal couldn't cock the gun. He beat at Reilly's face with his free hand, but Reilly was twisting the gun against the marshal's fingers. Peters cried out as the pain hit him. Then Reilly stood up, the Federal man's gun in his hand.

HE BACKED away a step, seeing Peters nurse his tortured fingers. Winehaven was on the ground clutching his hip, and blood welled from between his fingers. A crowd that had gathered on the corner was all but blocking the street now.

Reaching down, Reilly pulled the marshal to his feet, and shoved him toward Jim Buttelow, who grabbed Peter's arms and held him.

"Better get a doc for Herb," Reilly said. Al Murdock wheeled, pushing his way through the crowd. Peters showed no further resistance.

Reilly said, "Seems like I've cleaned myself right in the hole. By spring my money'll be gone."

He tipped up his head and saw Childress watching him. "I've been too stubborn or proud or something to ask you for a thing, but I'm asking now. Could you lend me five hundred dollars?"

Childress said, and his voice had a frog in it, "you don't know how long I've been waiting just to be wanted. We'll set you up again, son. By golly, we'll set you up in fine style."

Murdock came back then with the doctor, then went back to break up the crowd. Jim Buttelow stood behind Peters like a dog just waiting for the opportunity to bite.

He said to Reilly, "This one's going to stretch a new rope."

Murdock caught Reilly's eye and said, "There's a girl waiting on the hotel porch, boy. You keep her in the dark any longer and she's liable to go crazy just worrying."

"All right," Reilly said, and started away.

"The kid," Reilly said, "is Jane Alford's boy. I reckon she'll be worried about him."

"I'll take care of it." Murdock scooped the boy onto his shoulder and walked down the street.

Reilly walked to the corner and stopped. He saw Tess Isham on the porch. Murdock was just entering the hotel with Jane Alford's boy. Reilly smiled and walked on down the street, his stride lengthened considerably. Tess came off the porch to meet him, running into his open arm. Two dozen people stood along both sides of the street, eyes wide, but neither noticed them.

"I'm flat," Reilly said. "Burned out. Busted. Can you take that, Tess?"

"I'd rather build my own future with you anyway," she said, and kissed him.

The kiss was a shock. He understood then that she had been holding out on him when she had kissed him before. Her lips were fire, and she hurt him with her ardor.

When they parted, Reilly said, "Well, I'll be!"

Tess smiled, for she understood what he meant. She liked the idea of being a woman of fire.

THE END

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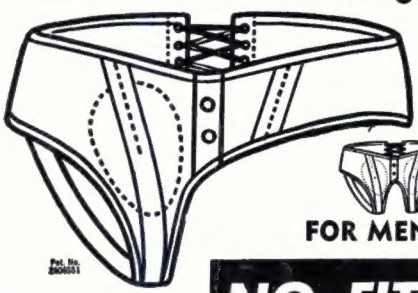

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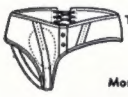

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Some of us wondered if she was telling the truth. Until a heavy rock came crashing through the bedroom window, narrowly missing her head! Next we found that our car had been deliberately damaged.

And so Caroline is marooned out here for the night . . .

It's interesting to watch a pretty woman who is frightened and does not know which way to run. She seems grateful for our shelter; she even seems to trust us. With the living room brightly lighted, Caroline behaves as if she is perfectly safe here with us.

But she isn't. I know—because **I am the murderer who must kill her before morning!**

* * *

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